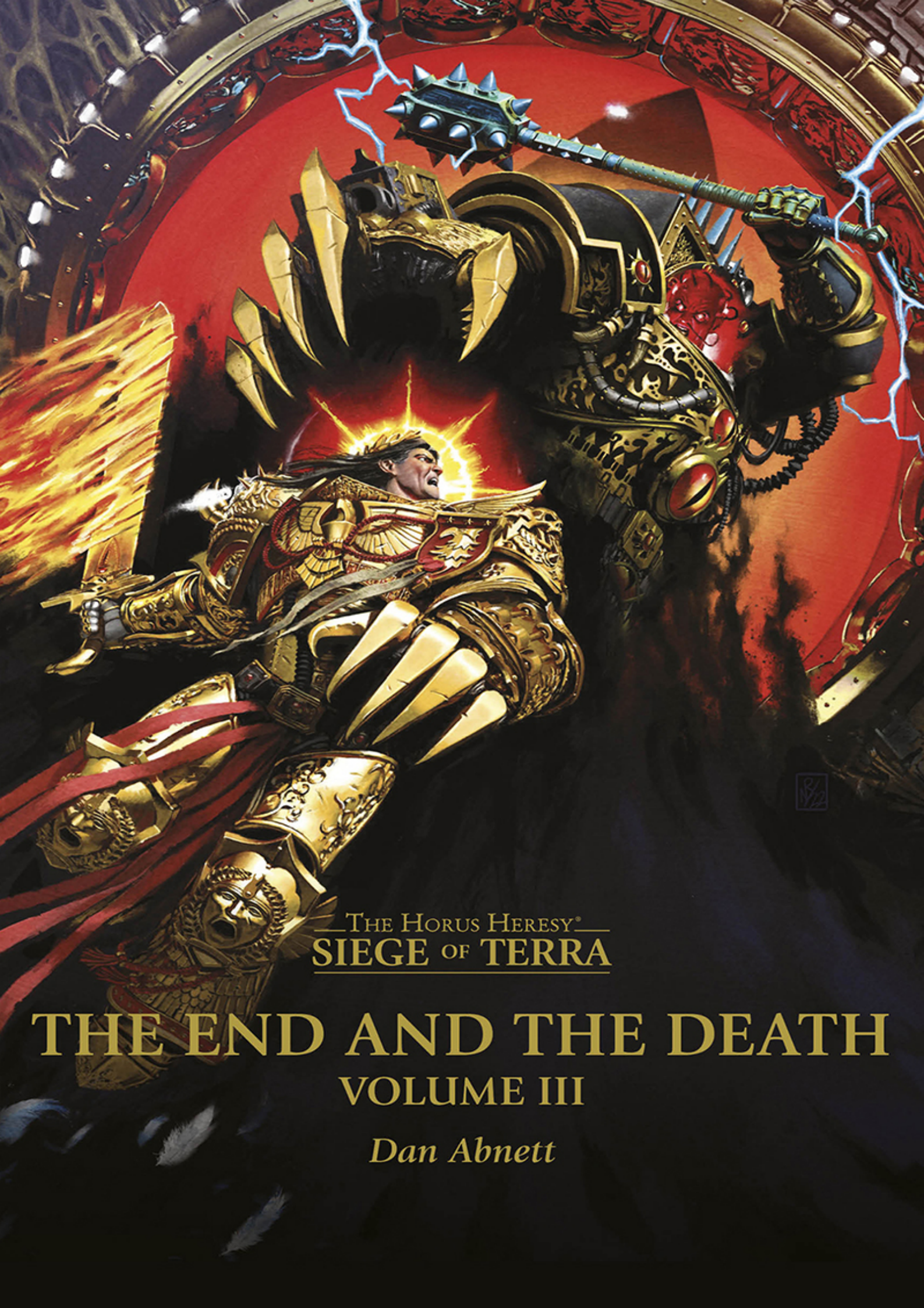

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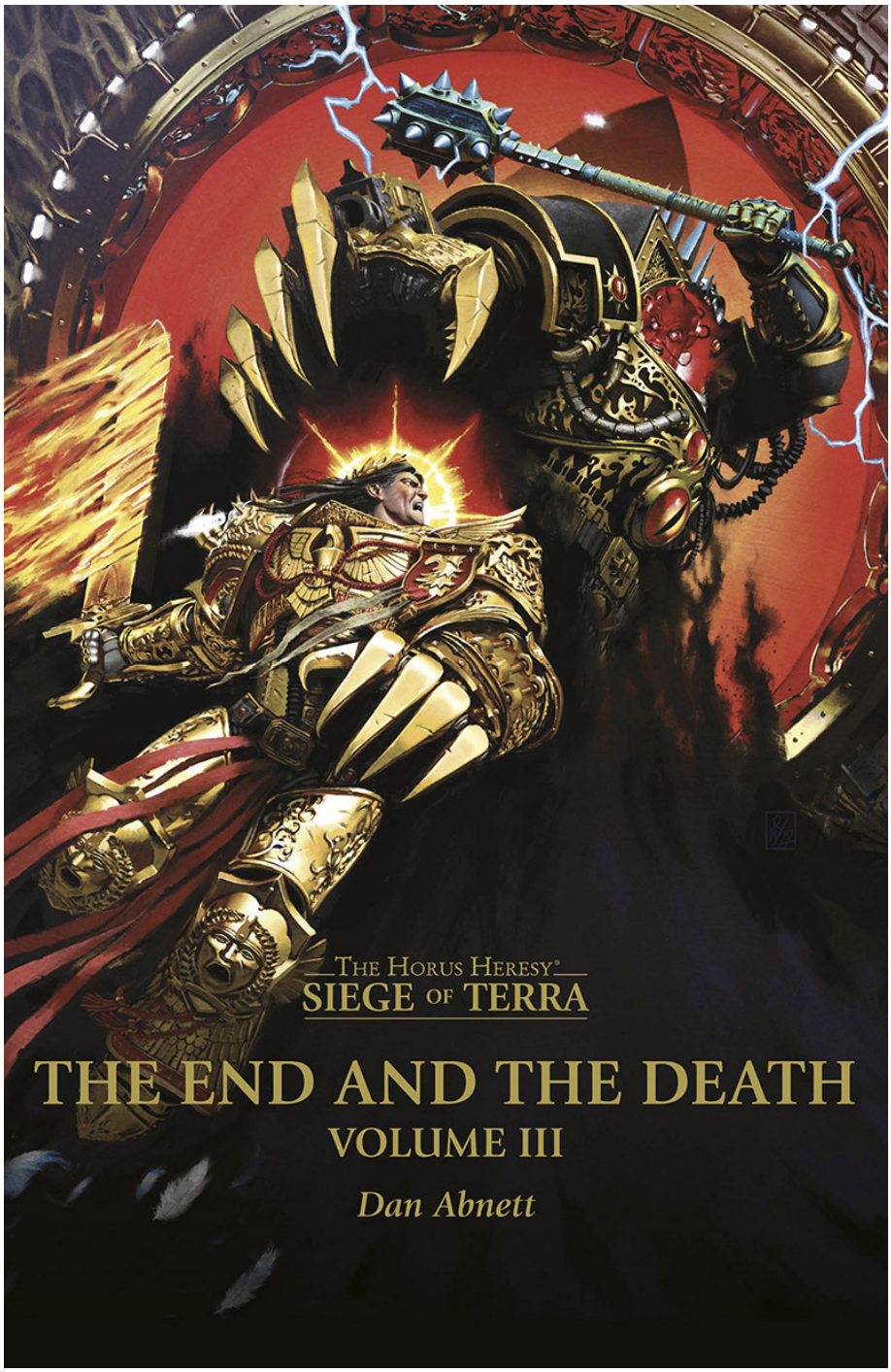
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THE HORUS HERESY®
SIEGE OF TERRA

It is a time of legend.

The galaxy is in flames. The Emperor's glorious vision for humanity is in ruins. His favoured son, Horus, has turned from his father's light and embraced Chaos.

His armies, the mighty and redoubtable Space Marines, are locked in a brutal civil war. Once, these ultimate warriors fought side by side as brothers, protecting the galaxy and bringing mankind back into the Emperor's light. Now they are divided.

Some remain loyal to the Emperor, whilst others have sided with the Warmaster. Pre-eminent amongst them, the leaders of their thousands-strong Legions, are the primarchs. Magnificent, superhuman beings, they are the crowning achievement of the Emperor's genetic science. Thrust into battle against one another, victory is uncertain for either side.

Worlds are burning. At Isstvan V, Horus dealt a vicious blow and three loyal Legions were all but destroyed. War was begun, a conflict that will engulf all mankind in fire. Treachery and betrayal have usurped honour and nobility. Assassins lurk in every shadow. Armies are gathering. All must choose a side or die.

Horus musters his armada, Terra itself the object of his wrath. Seated upon the Golden Throne, the Emperor waits for his wayward son to return. But his true enemy is Chaos, a primordial force that seeks to enslave mankind to its capricious whims.

The screams of the innocent, the pleas of the righteous resound to the cruel laughter of Dark Gods. Suffering and damnation await all should the Emperor fail and the war be lost.

The end is here. The skies darken, colossal armies gather.
For the fate of the Throneworld, for the fate of mankind itself…

The Siege of Terra has begun.

THE HORUS HERESY®
SIEGE OF TERRA

THE END AND THE DEATH
VOLUME III

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THE EMPEROR – Master of Mankind, Last and First Lord of the Imperium

HORUS LUPERCAL – Primarch of the XVI Legion, Ascendant Vessel of Chaos

The Defenders of Terra

MALCADOR THE SIGILLITE – Regent of the Imperium

CONSTANTIN VALDOR – Captain-General of the Legio Custodes

The Loyalist Primarchs

ROGAL DORN – Praetorian of Terra, Primarch of the VII Legion

VULKAN – The Last Guardian, Primarch of the XVIII Legion

Legio Custodes

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HARAHEL – Aedile-Marshal, Warden of the Sodality of the Key

IOS RAJA – Hetaeron Companion

CAECALTUS DUSK – Hetaeron Proconsul

UZKAREL OPHITE – Hetaeron Proconsul

DOLO LAMORA – Sentinel-Companion

LUDOVICUS – Proconsul Hykanatoi

ERASTES – Tharanatoi (Hetaeron)

TELAMOK

MAEZARI

KUPALORI – Proconsul

Amon Tauromachian – Custodian

Sisters of Silence

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Aphone Ire – Vigil Commander of the Raptor Guard

Srinika Ridhi – Knight-Centura of the Clouded Leopard Cadre

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Khalid Hassan

Zaranchek Xanthus

Moriana Mouhausen

Gallent Sidozie

Garviel Loken – The Lone Wolf

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Ilya Ravallion – Strategist

Jonas Gaston – Junior

Lords of the Council of Terra and Lords Principal

Zagreus Kane – Fabricator-in-exile

Nemo Zhi-Meng – Choirmaster of the Adeptus Astra Telepathica

Eirech Halferphess – Astrotelegraphica Exulta of the Higher Tower

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Archamus – Master of the Huscarls

Fafnir Rann – Lord Seneschal, Captain of the First Assault Cadre

Fisk Halen – Captain, 19th Tactical Company

Val Tarchos – Sergeant, 19th Tactical Company

Maximus Thane – Captain, 22nd Company Exemplars

Leod Baldwin

Calodin

Lignis

Bedwyr

Devarlin

Mizos

Demeny – Initiate

Guil Conort

Artolun – Huscarl

Oxaros – Templar

Antykus – Templar

Pontis – Templar

Myrinx – Templar

Sigismund

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Sojuk – Khan

Namahi – Master of the Keshig

Hemheda – Khan

Kyzo – Outrider

Ibelin Kumo

The IX Legion 'Blood Angels'

Raldoron – First Captain, First Chapter

Azkaellon – Herald of the Sanguinary Guard

Taerwelt Ikasati – Sanguinary Guard

Zephon – Dominion, 'The Bringer of Sorrow'

Nassir Amit – 'The Flesh Tearer'

Lamirus – Sergeant

Sarodon Sacre

Maheldaron

Meshol

Dytal Maegius

Zealis Varens

Rinas Dol

Kystos Gaellon

Khotus Meffiel

Satel Aimery

Khoradal Furio

Emhon Lux

Malix Hest

The Shattered Legions

Atok Abidemi – Draaksward, XVIII Legion 'Salamanders'

Odi Sartak – Captain, VI Legion 'Space Wolves'

Tjaras Grunli – VI Legion 'Space Wolves'

Rhi Echimar – XVIII Legion 'Salamanders'

Faustal – Cataphractii, X Legion 'Iron Hands'

Janjar – VI Legion 'Space Wolves'

The I Legion 'Dark Angels'

Corswain – Lord Seneschal, the Hound of Caliban

Adophel – Chapter Master

Tragan – Captain of the Ninth Order

Vorlois

Bruktas

Harlock

Blamires

Vanital

Erlorial

Carloi

Asradael

Tanderion

Cartheus

Zahariel

The Imperial Army (Excertus, Auxilia and others)

Aldana Agathe – Marshal, Antioch Miles Vesperi

Phikes – Her adjutant

Mikhail – Captain, 403rd Exigency Stratiotes

'Choke' – 403rd Exigency Stratiotes

And others

Prefectus

Hellick Mauer – Boetharch

The Order of Interrogators

Kyril Sindermann

Leeta Tang

The Citizen Conclave

Euphrati Keeler

Eild

Perevanna

Wereft

Katsuhiro

The Traitor Host

The XVI Legion 'Sons of Horus'

Ezekyle Abaddon – First Captain

Kinor Argonis – Equerry to Warmaster Lupercal

Ulnok – Equerry to the First Captain

Azelas Baraxa – Captain of Second Company

Kaltos – Second Company

Tarchese Malabreux – Master of the Catulan Reavers

Hellas Sycar – Master of the Justaerin

Taras Balt – Captain of Third Company

Vorus Ikari – Captain of Fourth Company

Xhofar Beruddin – Captain of Fifth Company

Ekron Fal – Centurion, Justaerin

Kalintus – Captain of Ninth Company

Zistrion – Captain of 13th Company

Jeraddon – Captain

Yrmand – Captain

Phaeto Zeletsis – Praetor-Captain

Arnanod – Sergeant

Zeto Curalis

Lael Gustus – Justaerin Terminator

Besh Varia – Justaerin Terminator

Otun Rindol – Justaerin Terminator

Ketron Bargaddon – Justaerin Terminator

Gir Kucher – Justaerin Terminator

Fermel – Squad leader, First Company

The XIV Legion 'Death Guard'

Typhus – First Captain

Serob Kargul – Lord Contemptor

Vorx – Lord of Silence

Kadex Ilkarion

Caipha Morarg

Melphior Craw

Skulidas Gehrerg

The XVII Legion 'Word Bearers'

Erebus – Dark Apostle

The XV Legion 'Thousand Sons'

Ahzek Ahriman – Sorcerer

The Dark Mechanicum

Clain Pent – Fifth Disciple of Nul

Eyet-One-Tag – Speaker of the Epta War-Stead linked unity

Others

Basilio Fo – War criminal

Andromeda-17 – Selenar

The Long Companions

OLL PERSSON – Perpetual

JOHN GRAMMATICUS – Logokine

ACTAE – Prophetess

LEETU – Proto-Astartes

INTERLUDE

DISTANT SONS

i

Just hold

‘I repeat, we are nine hours out. Deploying now to wide formation assault positions, inbound. Terra Control, do you receive? Can you respond? Repeat, we are nine hours out. Terra Control, we need immediate tracking guidance. Light your beacons. We are extending to wide assault formation. Terra, remain in secure defensive alignment. Hold your positions. That’s all you need to do. Just hold. I repeat, we are nine hours out. Terra Control, acknowledge. Hold your positions and light guidance now. Terra Control, this is Guilliman.’

When Roboute Guilliman finishes speaking, a silence gathers in the flagship’s master-vox chamber. No one dares to speak, thinks Thiel. Or no one has anything to say. Tension has been a permanent state for eight days, as constant as the sigh of the air-scrubbers or the hum of realspace drives throbbing the deck plates.

Guilliman stays in his seat, watching the Master of Vox minutely adjust the dials of the ship’s main transmitter. Satisfied, Master Silactus throws the row of switches that shuts down the vox-caster with a warm thump and ends transmission. He turns, and bows solemnly to the primarch.

‘Message encrypted and sent, my lord,’ he says.

Guilliman detaches the vox-cable from the external port in his armour’s gorget, passes it to a waiting attendant, and rises to his feet.

‘Inform me immediately of anything, Silactus,’ says Guilliman. ‘The slightest variation in background noise. Even if you don’t think it’s a transmission.’

‘I will, my lord.’

‘We go again in fifteen cycles,’ says Guilliman. ‘By voice.’

‘Of course, my lord.’

Guilliman walks towards the chamber hatch. Thiel and the protection detail fall in behind him. They go where he goes.

‘Review, Aeonid,’ the primarch says to him without looking around. Thiel doesn’t question it, or point out that they are conducting a review every ten cycles, or remind his lord that if anything – *anything* – had changed while Guilliman was making his broadcast, Thiel would have been informed, and would have broken in immediately. This is Guilliman’s mode now. Utter, unwavering focus. To remark upon it is not to risk the primarch’s anger, but rather a cold look of reproach that a man might carry for the rest of his life like a wound.

Likewise the transmissions. Every fifteen cycles. The Master of Vox could easily resend the file of Guilliman’s original message, but the primarch insists on making it in person every time, as though his voice will carry further and more clearly than any recording.

Thiel does not think of his lord as a superstitious man. But there is an obsessive compulsion to Guilliman’s current mode, an attention to every detail, as though Guilliman worries that the slightest operational lapse will court ill fortune.

‘You think me too careful, Aeonid?’ Guilliman asks as they walk.

Reading my mind now, are you, my great lord? Thiel thinks.

‘Given the history of this conflict, lord primarch,’ Thiel replies, ‘it is evident that no one can be too careful.’

‘Good answer,’ Guilliman replies.

They enter the bridge. The command deck of Guilliman’s acting flagship, *Courage Above All*, is running quietly and diligently despite the hundreds of personnel present. Eikos Lamiad, Tetrarch of Ultramar-Konor, Captain Demet Valita, and Shipmaster Dohel are waiting beside the strategium table on the dais. The table, its huge frame wrought of chased silver

and steel, is already lit. Thiel did not have to signal ahead. They knew a review would be required.

Guilliman walks directly to the table and stares at the complex hololith it is projecting from its glass surface. The protection detail holds back, but Thiel stays at the primarch's side.

'Begin,' says Guilliman.

The tetrarch commences his overview. It is more a recitation than a statement. They have done this every ten cycles for the last eight days, and scarcely a word has changed.

'The fleet has deployed to wide assault positions eighteen light minutes outside the terminator shock boundary of the Solar Realm,' says Lamiad. 'The fleet amasses thirty-two hundred vessels…'

Thiel knows it by heart. Thirty-two hundred principal vessels, most of them grand cruiser class or larger, supported by bulk carriers, war-engine mass transports, and a flotilla of tenders. It contains most of Battlefleet Macragge, the Konor Squadron, the Saramanth Squadron, the Lux Ultramaris battle group, the Third Vanguard Flotilla of the Five Hundred Worlds, the Occluda Second Principal Fleet, the Minos Crucis Fast-Attack, and allied warships of the Shattered Legions. Lamiad lists each ship by name, and Guilliman lets him. The fleet translated from the warp eight days earlier via extra-system Mandeville points when it became evident that the Solar Realm was impassable. It has been slowly approaching the hem of the realm ever since on realspace impellers in an assault-ready crescent formation six thousand kilometres wide.

They remain assault-ready. Hosts of Astartes sit in silence, fully plated, in their launch-armed drop pods or aboard Stormbirds on the launch racks of the excursion bays, on every vessel. In hangar decks, pilots wait beside their prepped Furies and Xiphon interceptors, and in the echoing troop bays, Excertus and Auxilia armies in full kit shift restlessly on the loading decks beside their hulking transports.

Some say it is the largest armada assembled since the early days of the Great Crusade. Thiel worries that it is not.

Thiel studies the hololithic display while the tetrarch speaks. It hasn't changed any more than Lamiad's words have. In one corner of the table glows a graphic representation of the fleet, called by some the vengeance fleet, and by others the salvation fleet. Guilliman simply calls it 'the fleet'. It is the first to arrive. There will be others, other fleets currently pushing the tolerances of their warp drives as they race across the galaxy from all points to answer Guilliman's call.

The vast fleet is just a little crescent on the table, like a pale new moon. The remainder of the wide surface-plate shows a representation of the Solar Realm.

It is a dark blankness, without feature. There are no marker icons for the Throneworld, or Luna, or Mars, or even Sol. A few tags along the edge display spatial condition details obtained by scout drogues sent forward by the *Solace of Iax*, the grand battleship acting as advance picket at one tip of the armada's crescent. The data on these tags is already beginning to degrade, but what remains legible speaks only of the impossible. An abominable level of exotic energies and immaterial flux, many types of which have never previously been recorded or observed. A de-constitution of realspace. An absolute collapse of four-dimensional physics. Everything has corrupted, transfigured, or ceased.

There is no longer a causal flow of time in the Solar Realm.

It is a blackness, without feature or form, an imperfect sphere of neverness some four thousand light minutes in diameter. It is being referred to as 'the negation zone'. It is expanding slowly, beyond the heliopause of the Sol System, and is starting to envelop the Opik-Oort Cloud, and disturb its ice-dust and its nurseries of long-period comets.

Thiel knows that the area is big, inconceivably big, the entire span of a solar system. He also knows that however big he imagines it is, the true scale is beyond his comprehension.

There is no way to determine the position of the sun or Terra in the negation zone, or to know if either still exists. It is not even possible to calculate a projection of Terra's location based on established astronomical data. The vast area of blackness, that four-thousand-light-minutes span as observed from the interstellar medium outside, is primarily composed of warpstuff, and thus may be vastly bigger inside.

Without a beacon or true signal to lead it in, the fleet cannot reach Terra. They could go in blind, of course, and scour the blackness in the hope of finding something. But such an effort might take them a hundred thousand years, and they would most likely go missing themselves.

The absence of a beacon or response is more than just a block to navigation. It suggests there is no one left to find. It suggests that all is entirely lost.

Lamiad finishes his review. Shipmaster Dohel begins his status report of the fleet's fitness, which Thiel also knows word for word.

Guilliman raises his hand, cutting Dohel short.

'No need, old friend,' he says. 'We all know.'

He studies the strategium. They all glance at each other. It is the first time in eight days that the primarch has broken his meticulous routine. Is his patience wearing thin? Is his desperate need to come to his father's aid eroding his good sense and tactical genius?

Is he actually thinking of… *going in anyway*?

'I want…' he begins quietly, 'proposals.'

'Proposals, my lord?' Lamiad asks.

'Proposals for reasonable measures of approach, Eikos,' Guilliman replies. 'I will consider anything. Perhaps a long, advanced column, our ships in a chain, each tied by vox-contact to the one behind, to fathom a route. Or beacon drogues sent ahead to light the way and transmit incremental navigation data–'

‘A chain-advance would leave us entirely vulnerable to hostile ambush, my lord,’ says Lamiad.

‘The drogues are quickly overwhelmed by immaterial conditions, my lord,’ says Dohel, ‘and any data cannot be trusted, or expected to remain fixed–’

‘That’s enough,’ says Thiel. He can see the look on Guilliman’s face. ‘The primarch is not suggesting such things, and is perfectly aware of their impracticalities. They are merely theoreticals to illustrate the type of ideas he is looking for.’

Dohel nods. Captain Valita gives Thiel a cold look, but says nothing. An Astartes sergeant gets to scold a tetrarch when he serves as commander of the Master of Ultramar’s protection detail.

‘Theoreticals, precisely,’ says Guilliman. He gestures towards the ominous blankness of the table’s display. ‘The only enemy I see, my friends, is tension. I would rather we had an actual foe to engage.’

He pauses.

‘The Emperor must live,’ he adds.

And what if He does not? Thiel wonders. What follows? A collapse of the Imperium? An endless war against the usurping Warmaster? The ascension of Ultramar as the new Imperium in the East? Would Guilliman succeed his father? Surely there is no other candidate–

Damn the theoreticals. Thiel looks away.

He does so in time to see the Mistress of Sensoria rise from her seat twenty metres below on the main floor of the bridge.

‘My lord–’ Thiel says at once.

Guilliman has seen her too. They descend to the sensoria station, with Lamiad, Dohel and Valita trailing.

‘Contact,’ the Mistress of Sensoria declares. She steadies her voice. ‘I am painting a contact six AU inside the anomaly

limits.’

‘Inside?’ Guilliman asks, joining her.

‘Within the zone of… of disruption, yes, my lord,’ she replies.

‘A signal?’ Guilliman asks. Though he tries to disguise it, there is a note of hope in the primarch’s voice that Thiel finds unbearably painful.

‘No, my lord. A ship.’

The Mistress of Sensoria snaps her fingers, and her officers redouble their efforts at the stations around her, finessing auspex, main augurs, and particle sweeps.

‘Indistinct,’ she says, studying the screen as the results collate. ‘Almost an imaging ghost. But it appears to be a vessel of significant displacement. Any smaller, and it would be invisible in that miasma.’

After days of scrutiny, it’s the first source, signal or object of any kind they have detected inside the negation zone.

‘Identity?’ Guilliman asks, looking for himself. ‘Marker code? Transponder?’

‘None registering,’ replies the Mistress of Sensoria.

‘That’s a large ship…’ comments Lamiad.

‘Can you rotate the image to plan view, enhance, and run a silhouette comparative?’ Dohel asks the Mistress of Sensoria.

‘Already in process, my master,’ she replies. The fuzz of green light on the black screen tilts slightly, but becomes no more distinct. It’s just a blur to Thiel. If he hadn’t been told, he would have mistaken it for a smudged thumbprint on the glass. Which is why he is a Legiones Astartes master-at-arms and the Mistress of Sensoria is the Mistress of Sensoria.

‘Gloriana class,’ she says abruptly. ‘Awaiting cogitator confirmation… Yes, Gloriana class.’

Dohel is about to say something.

‘Scylla pattern,’ says the Mistress of Sensoria. ‘Cogitation confirms Gloriana class, Scylla pattern.’ She looks at Guilliman nervously.

‘Which one?’ he asks.

The Mistress of Sensoria somehow retains her composure.

‘There is not a long list of alternatives, my lord,’ she says. ‘Configuration of the hull and bow do not match any profiles in the registry, and it is significantly larger than any Gloriana class on record. It has clearly undergone refit or rebuild, or perhaps some other form of alteration–’

‘Which *one*?’ asks Guilliman again.

‘I cannot authenticate definitively, my lord,’ she says. ‘But aspects of the stern assembly and hull plating suggest it is the *Vengeful Spirit*.’

There is a long silence.

‘Does he…’ Guilliman clears his throat. ‘Does he *come* for us?’

‘The contact is not moving or under power,’ says the Mistress of Sensoria. ‘No shields, no trace of weapons primed or armed–’

‘Prepare to engage,’ Guilliman says to Dohel quietly. ‘I want that ship dead.’

Dohel nods. ‘I ask you to confirm your instruction, my lord.’

‘So confirmed and ordered,’ Guilliman responds.

Dohel turns.

‘Officer of record,’ he shouts. ‘Start the mark.’

‘Initiating Thirteenth Legion combat record, elapsed time count,’ the Rubricator Martial replies. ‘Count begins. Solar Realm mark zero-zero decimal zero-zero decimal zero-zero.’

‘My lord,’ says the Mistress of Sensoria suddenly. ‘A… a second contact.’

‘Ah,’ says Guilliman, turning back to her. ‘Now his fleet emerges–’

‘It is another Gloriana-class vessel,’ she says.

‘Another?’

‘Six light minutes lateral to the first, not in formation.’

‘Is it the *Conqueror*?’

She hesitates. She wants to answer him obediently, but she doesn’t know how.

‘Mistress?’ says Guilliman. ‘Will you oblige me with an answer?’

‘We have pattern match,’ she says in a small voice. ‘It is also the *Vengeful Spirit*.’

‘This is an imaging error,’ Dohel says immediately. ‘Refresh the–’

‘Third contact!’ announces an officer at the station beside them.

‘Fourth contact!’ calls another.

The Mistress of Sensoria starts to project the sensor data on the main display. By the time she has added the first four, another six have been called out, then ten more. The number continues to rise, an officer calling out every few seconds.

The ships, now thirty-odd in number and rising, are scattered across the negation zone ahead. Some are close to the edge, just light seconds away at the fringe of the heliopause limit. Others are deeper inside the zone. They are not in any kind of formation, or fleet cohesion, and many are not aligned to the galactic plane or even pointing in the same direction, relative. None are under power. They are floating, adrift, spread across an area twenty-six light minutes square, which, significantly, is the current scope of the flagship’s sensoria cone.

There are now fifty. Seventy. Two hundred and ten. Four hundred.

They are all Gloriana class. Only twenty such ships were ever made.

They are all the *Vengeful Spirit*, multiplying, breeding, slowly filling the negation zone like stars coming out, or like a ramifying fractal pattern.

A thousand, three thousand, six…

They are all the same ship, one ship, the Warmaster's monstrous battleship, and it is everywhere.

ii

Iron Blooded

Unlike his brother Rogal Dorn, the Lord of Iron has never condemned the tactic of retreat. Not surrender, not yielding – those are different things entirely. But retreat, as an instrument of warfare, has always seemed viable to Perturabo, and entirely in accordance with his rationality and cold logic.

It is a matter of combat efficiency and economy. The Lord of Iron will sacrifice a million lives, if that's what victory costs. But if he calculates victory to be impossible, he will not waste a single further soul on the effort. In an unviable position, the answer is not glory or a valiant show of courage. The answer is *stop*. Break off. Retreat. Reposition at a time when and a place where victory is viable once more. Wastage only has merit when it accomplishes something.

Perturabo is retreating from the field.

The *Iron Blood*, his titanic flagship, leads the fleet of the IV Legion away from Terra. The ships move at low impeller, like drifting citadels of steel, out past the orbit of Mars. Even if the *Iron Blood* had been built with window ports, there is nothing to see outside. No void, no realspace, no distant glimpse of Mars, a ruby against soft, black velvet. There is nothing outside except the coagulating medium of warpflux, the nephelosphere radiating outwards from the Throneworld. The immaterium has been spilled by the actions of the Warmaster, and is slowly filling and consuming the entire Solar Realm. Unlike loyalist vessels, the warships of the Iron Warriors are not blind and helpless in this medium. Perturabo reads the warp as clearly as any data.

At some point, Perturabo will order the fleet to translate, and move away from the Solar Realm at the superluminary velocities allowed by the warp. At some point.

Perturabo is in no hurry. He has time. Time is inoperative inside this broken realm.

He sits alone in his private chamber, and ruminates, lit by the blue glow of the cradled cogitators. Data is reassuring, even in the quantities that flow across his screens. It never lies to him. It owes no allegiance. It has no bias. It simply *is*.

The blue gloom is like a twilight. His own? he wonders. Someone else's?

Though he can justify retreat, he doesn't like the taste of it. Terra should have been his greatest accomplishment, the undertaking that would have established his supremacy unequivocally. Enough, *alone*, for him to take the Palace of Terra and crush it through siegecraft. A gratifying bonus to contend, at last, with Dorn, and demand satisfaction. A duel. Single combat by siege warfare. It was clear that Perturabo was going to win.

Clear, but not actually proven.

He breaks things sometimes, when the fits of bitterness and rage become too much. Furniture. Data-looms. Trophies. His warhammer leaves dents in the chamber's bulkheads, and so do his fists. He even destroys a cogitator in its cradle.

The bitterness remains long after he has called the mute servitors in to replace the device.

Satisfaction. There is none now. None to claim and none to demand. No supremacy. No proof, hard as iron and undeniable, of his superior craft. He walked away from all of that. He chose retreat.

On the final day, he quit the field.

Peevishness? No. Frustration? Petulance? No, neither of those. Vanity? *Never*. Anger? Some, but not enough to explain his decision.

Hate. Hate explains it. He takes up the warhammer *Forgebreaker*, teeth clenched.

The Lord of Iron has not even permitted the Iron Circle into the chamber since embarkation. The battle-automata wait outside the chamber hatch, dormant but active/ready. He wonders what it's like to be them, to feel–

Well, they do not feel, which is the point. They are instruments, designed for purpose. They do not feel or judge or reflect. They do not ruminate. They are weapons that act with supreme effect when the moment arises, and are oblivious to the silence otherwise. Like data, they owe no allegiance. They have no bias. They simply *are*.

Perturabo is a weapon too. A perfect one. As perfect as a mortal organism can be, at least. There's always room for improvement. He imagines himself as a perfect weapon. A *more* perfect weapon, something pure, something that is only a weapon and nothing else. An embodiment of absolute obliteration.

There are ways to achieve that state. He knows that. The data has shown it to him as an irrefutable outcome. He knows what he must plan and achieve to accomplish it.

He just has to decide if he can bear to, for all great accomplishments come with a cost.

Hate. He takes it out on the deck, because neither his father nor brother are present. Sparks fly. Adamantine cracks.

Quiet, his heart rate slightly elevated, he sits slumped across his seat. The hammer is on the floor at his feet. He watches the blue data flicker and flow, unbiased.

He has often wished to study the daggers employed by Lorgar and his sons. The opportunity is probably passed now. No one knows where Lorgar is. Where do the excommunicated go?

Perturabo has no time at all for the rites and ritual gibberish of the Word Bearers. It is all utterly data-unsupported. But to hear them speak of those daggers… Ignoring the embellishment of their poetry, their endless damn words, they make the athames sound so pure. The blades certainly have heightened properties. He has seen the evidence.

The blades are so steeped in their own function, so condensed, so utterly themselves. They are weapons whose nature as weapons has become almost sentient. They just *are*.

Some, he has been told, are so laden with the essence of the murders they have been used to commit, they have *become* murder. They are physical objects expressing conceptual forms in ways that words, and language, and even data cannot encompass. Like… like *sigils*, perhaps, if he understands the symbology favoured by the old Regent. Hyper-compressed meaning in solid form. They are sharp enough to cut materia and immateria alike. They are weapons *because* they are weapons.

He would have loved to study one.

Or be one. He would like that too.

He *does* understand the old Regent's symbology. Of course he does. He understands it perfectly. He doesn't believe in it, because it's patently more gibberish, but he does *understand* it. He understands it so thoroughly he can *see* what folly it is.

How that old fool ran an Imperium for decades is beyond him.

Hate is a curious thing. It is the ultimate bias.

Perturabo is a weapon, the greatest ever born. His father used him as a weapon, time and time again, which suited Perturabo perfectly well. But his father never thought to show his appreciation. He just kept using.

One does not thank a sword. Of course not. But Perturabo was also, unfortunately, a son. A son with a feeling soul. He never asked for that soul, or that tie of blood, and would have been happy to have never known them, but there you go.

A sword with a soul would learn to hate its owner if its edge was never sharpened or the blood was never wiped from it.

Hating his father became easy. Eventually. Eventually, it was a natural state. It became his hard edge, self-sharpening. Then

his brother came along, with a hate all of his own, and the rest seemed so straightforward.

Hate ebbs. It takes him a moment to prise the hammer's head out of the wall plate.

Horus, then. Horus, Horus… Born from the first to greatness and favour. Likeable… No, more than that. *Irresistible*. They seemed to have so much in common.

But Horus was always more of a dress sword than a working blade.

Things began well. Events unfolded that Perturabo was eminently suited for. Promises were made. A bright future was negotiated, a configuration of the human Imperium better befitting a son like Perturabo.

But slowly he was used by Horus as he had been used by his father. He was left to achieve the near impossible, and rebuked when the near impossible was as slow to achieve as the near impossible always is.

And Horus left him to it. The dress sword remained in its gaudy, ornamental scabbard. So did any appreciation. Appreciation remained in its scabbard too.

That was bad enough. But bearable. Then–

He almost demolishes another cogitator. He pulls the blow at the last moment, and turns the hammer on his seat instead. His scream of hatred bounces back off the chamber's iron walls, and seems to refill his lungs.

He lowers *Forgebreaker*. He has buckled the back of his seat, and sent the headrest spinning down the length of the room.

No matter. He will sit in discomfort. He is used to it.

So, Horus. Those promises broken as easily as a chair's headrest or a patch of wall. Supremacy was always his goal. *His* supremacy. The future that would allow for it was not the configuration that Horus had shown to Perturabo to entice him. It was an atrocity that would burn down the great aspects of the Imperium along with the rot that needed to be excised. It

was a waste. And it was also a surrender. A surrender to forces that had no place in human affairs.

Perturabo does not surrender.

Horus' idea of victory was not a victory at all, whether Perturabo took the Palace or not. It was not a victory that the Lord of Iron could cost out. It was an unviable position, a victory he calculated to be impossible. He studies the data scrupulously, and it never lies to him. Having learned to hate Horus as much as he hated his father, Perturabo resolved he would not waste a single further soul on the effort. There was nothing to be gained.

Perturabo double-checked the calculations, and quit the field an hour later.

There is no going back now. None at all.

He sits in the broken chair, hunched forward, and watches the data. It talks to him in its unbiased voice. Horus is going to win. Horus' version of victory, at least, not one supported by the data. So, the dress sword has finally drawn itself. Terra is perhaps two hours from collapse. The Warmaster's ruination is triumphant.

Logic says the Lord of Iron can go back. Retreat from retreat. Even at this late stage, he could return. He could pre-empt the inevitable wrath that will follow by making his apology before it is demanded of him, by kneeling at the feet of the new Master of Mankind, by pledging a new oath, and making a new promise. Logic says that such an action, showing unprompted respect and humility, might commute the penalty for quitting the field. Especially if he gets there first, before all the others, like Fulgrim, and Alpharius, and Curze, and that wretched zealot Lorgar, come crawling out of the woodwork to plead for mercy and reconciliation in the light of Horus' victory. Be the first to do it, and an amnesty might be secured. Be the third or fourth, and forgiveness will be paper-thin.

That's what logic says.

Horus is about to triumph. That's what the data says.

Understand which way the wind is blowing, and bend with it before it breaks you.

That's what common sense would say.

Damn Horus to hell. That's what hate says. That's what the Lord of Iron screams at the wall as he dents it, and yells at the deck as he cracks it, and howls at the chair as he reduces it to debris.

Don't go back. Don't ever go back. He hates you too. He will not forgive. He will not find mercy in his heart. His configuration of the future, now dawning, does not allow for mercy.

Horus will punish you whether you go back or not. He will hunt you, and he will destroy you. He will kill you and every single one of your sons.

And if that's going to happen anyway, why go back at all?

The Lord of Iron sits on the deck, hunched over, and watches the data talk in calm, blue, twilight tones. It never lies to him. He watches it tell the story of the Warmaster's triumph. The victory of Horus, scrolling past one data-block at a time.

Damn him. Hate him. He used the Lord of Iron as a weapon, but he *made* the Lord of Iron his enemy. Perturabo will just have to make ready, and face him when he comes. Perturabo will simply have to kill Horus, and all his sons, and every single one of the idiots who cheer the name Lupercal, because they're too afraid not to. Every *single* one.

Hate can do that. The Lord of Iron can do that.

Especially if he has become something more by then. Something pure and perfect, because it is absolute and unique. Hyper-compressed meaning in solid form. The shadow cast by all weapons. There are ways to achieve that state. The data has shown it to him as an irrefutable outcome. He just has to decide if he can bear to, for all great accomplishments come at a price.

It will take persistence. He's never lacked that.

The data says that the Emperor *must* die now. The victory is calculated and certain. It's twilight.

Perturabo owes no allegiance. He has no bias. He hates *equally*.

He leans forward to watch.

iii

Excommunicado

All he ever wanted was the truth. And the truth always has been the Old Four. *Always*.

Banishment is good for the soul. A little distance, fresh air in the lungs.

Yssimae, fourteen months from Terra. Not too close, just far enough. The air is sweet. The ysslflowers growing wild on the slopes of the low hills have filled the air with a fragrance like copal incense. Lorgar Aurelian can see the anthomancers moving through the brambles, reading the petals.

The local star is small, hot and bright. The wind is warm. The sky has burned purple. The landscape, banking down from the low hills, is chalk white. At low anchor, *Fidelitas Lex* fills the sky to the west.

Compliance here was easy. Not a single shot was fired. Lorgar, and those who bore the word at his side, were greeted cautiously by the Yssm Elect, and calmly accepted an inspection by their xenomancers. The strangers were read and, though neither the xenomancers nor the Elect knew any of the words they wore on their armour and their skin, or spoke with their mouths, an easy peace was divined.

Lorgar walks towards the local town, Yssl Darnis, white-walled, white-roofed, stark in the sunlight. Umbromancers skirt the town walls on the side away from the sun, reading the shadows.

It's very warm. He feels sweat on his back under his robe. Is there a method for that? For reading the track of perspiration? Surely there must be. The Yssm are fixated by divination. Their entire social structure and culture is based upon it. Perhaps the method is related to urticariomancy?

He reaches to wipe sweat from his brow, and finds yesterday's ysslflower garland still on his head. The knotted crown of flowers is dry and starting to wilt. He takes it off, and throws it into the brambles beside the path. There will be a fresh one today. The Yssm crown him every morning.

As the path winds down towards the town gates, it passes a cluster of white clay huts. There are nests of these windowless, bell-shaped structures all over the landscape. They are private enclosures into which mancers of any discipline can retreat if their practice requires isolation, such as darkness to read a bowl of flames, or silence to hear the drip of water, or an unvented space in which to inhale sacred smoke.

From the enclosures come truths, sometimes trivial, sometimes inexplicable, sometimes profound.

Lorgar is interested in those truths. He admires the Yssmic dedication to pre-empting the future, and the sheer range and ingenuity of the methods they have invented to do it.

He has already shared his truth with them. He has told them that the only deep truth is the Old Four, and that the only future worth reaching is an immaculately conceived realm of Chaos. He has told them that there are many things that appear to be godlike and divine, and present themselves as such, even in prophecy and mantic form. These are not to be trusted. There is always a deeper truth behind them. There are better gods.

The Yssm accepted this without question. It seemed to fit perfectly with the foundational mysteries of their belief system, which they had developed over centuries through almost industrial levels of prognostication and divination.

They allowed him into their most hallowed shrines, and showed him the images of the true gods they had identified. He knew them at once, and could name all four for them.

That was the morning they started to crown him.

This particular group of huts, a cluster of eight, is set off the path, and aligned with certain distant hills, and to rays of the

sun at certain times of day, and to a sacred grove on the slopes behind him. The whole region, though it seems natural and pastoral, is a ritual landscape, shaped and adjusted over the millennia for sacred purposes, down to the placement of Yssl Darnis itself. It is an earthly reflection of heaven.

The Yssmic concept of heaven, anyway.

As Lorgar approaches, Kor Gurat emerges from one of the huts. He has spent three days immersed in sacred smoke. His eyes are bloodshot and unfocused.

He bows when he sees his primarch.

'What have you read?' Lorgar asks him.

'In the smoke, my lord,' he replies, 'I read neverness. It comes up like a storm. It is not clean, my lord.'

'Not clean? A curious word, Gurat.'

'I mean,' says Kor Gurat, 'it is ill-formed. It is not the perfect expression of the realm we seek.'

'The neverness, no doubt, is the primordial storm from which perfection will be born,' says Lorgar, who has much experience with interpretation.

'I think so. For I also saw weapons of cleansing–'

'Weapons?'

'To purge and wash the newborn realm, I presume,' says Kor Gurat. 'I saw a biological scourge that would undo all who oppose the truth, cell by cell. It ate flesh and, in the using of it, all morality.'

Lorgar is intrigued. 'Choose another method, Gurat, when you are refreshed. Seek more truths regarding this.'

Kor Gurat nods, willing but hesitant.

'What else did you read, my son?' Lorgar asks.

'I saw seven hammers set to bring down the world,' Gurat says, 'and five thrones–'

'Five?' asks Lorgar.

Gurat nods again. ‘I didn’t understand that part, my lord,’ he admits.

I do, Lorgar thinks. Four for the Old Four, and the fifth for the one who sits with them. Who will that be? Unless five thrones represents another aberration that Horus, both too strong and too weak, has devised to mutilate the truth.

More questions need to be asked.

‘I have been told this truth too,’ says Aridath Aarn, drawn from his own enclosure by the sound of voices outside. His hands are bare, and gleaming with holy oil. The chirognomists who were reading his palms and fingers hover in the doorway of the hut behind him.

‘Five thrones, one covered in blood,’ says Aarn. The young captain’s voice is slurred. He has been given a libation of astringent bark to amplify the reading of his hands. ‘On it, a dying king nailed in place, too weak to move, supported only by the power of magic.’

‘Not the first time I have heard this truth, captain,’ says Lorgar. A crippled king installed on a throne against his will, lacking the power to rule. Some answers have suggested that this is Horus, triumphant yet destroyed by the efforts that have been required to achieve his triumph. Such a king would be easy to remove.

‘In the lines of my palm has been witnessed an angel, dead,’ says Aarn, looking down at his hand pensively, as though it doesn’t belong to him. ‘A rage is unleashed because of it.’

Lorgar smiles. The Angel, destroyed? He can imagine his father’s wrath at such a loss. No wonder, then, that Horus ends up a crippled king when the patricide is done.

Such a battle. Lorgar is sad to be missing it. But exile is necessary.

‘The truths, my lord,’ says Kor Gurat, ‘they have been coming faster these last few days–’

‘Much faster,’ Aarn agrees. ‘Almost too fast–’

They both look tired.

‘These are the last days,’ Lorgar tells them. ‘It is no wonder. The warp is open to us. The eye of the gods is upon us. Rest, both of you. Then return to your study. Be guided by our friends here.’

The two Word Bearers bow to him.

He resumes his walk towards the town.

Yssimae suits him well. Lorgar was born on a spiritually dead world, where dry ritual had replaced living faith. Little, simple Yssimae is a spiritually vital world, awake to possibilities. It’s a space to breathe, and clear the head.

And then fill it again. The Yssm have willingly become an adjunct priesthood, eagerly toiling to furnish their esteemed visitors with divine knowledge, by every means at their disposal.

Fidelitas Lex impressed them very much. They had never seen its like. Its appearance in the sky must have been the greatest revelation of ouranomancy ever.

Lorgar impresses them too. They are fascinated by his skin, which gleams with the gold of the words written on it, and with the psykanic light he allows it to radiate. The Yssm have become his disciples, and he has, in turn, become theirs.

More of his sons come to meet him as he approaches the town gates. They are bearing many handwritten pages of divined truths, the latest gathered. They read them to him as he walks: truths learned from theriomancy, from umbilicomancy in the town’s small birthing hall, from cineromancy and turifumy at the hearths. Fire is a particular speciality here, and Lorgar listens closely.

He hears of sortilege, of oryctomancy mined from local quarries, of logomancy derived from the Yssmic study of the words written on the visitors’ war plate, and graptomancy read from the handstrokes with which those words were written.

So many forms and methods. One truth.

The Old Four.

It was plain to him before he came here. It is emphatic now.

Lorgar was right from the start. The very start. The truth is, and always has been, the Chaos gods.

Divination, by whatever means, is of course a subtle art. It requires patience and an exacting mind. It requires faith in oneself, and in the powers that are being read. It is far too easy to seize upon a superficial meaning. Layers must be peeled back, one after another, until an authentic answer is reached.

Take cartomancy. He has never favoured it. The layered and motile symbols, the unnecessary complexity. It is far too mannered and vague to function as a precise tool. The Emperor can keep his tarot. His Imperial Truth too. Lorgar favours precision instruments. Fire, for example. It's a speciality here.

Lorgar has made mistakes. The Old Four have not made his path to them easy, or his view of them clear. He has made mistakes of interpretation along the way.

The first was believing that his father was the divine absolute. Too many years wasted pursuing that notion. It caused him pain, and led to rejection, and it was wrong anyway.

He remembers the years he squandered on seers and scryers and soothsayers. Charlatans mostly, or otherwise gifted, but blinder than he was. He has been dreaming about the Blessed Lady recently. Cyrene Valantion, long dead. So many truths she seemed to have. And so very wrong most of them were.

He wonders why he's been dreaming about her. He must consult the oneiromancers and find out.

Once Chaos became the core of Lorgar's truth, an aspect of the divine he had no idea could exist, Horus became the mechanism. Such effort Lorgar made then, he and his apostles. Such hopes he had.

Alas. Though aligned to the Chaos powers, Horus has proven to be another dead end. Even shorn of his lightness as

‘Lupercal’, and set in the darkness of ‘Warmaster’, he has skewed the true reading.

Thus Horus has become another layer to be peeled back, as Lorgar skins the truth.

Which is why, of course, he is here, on a low-tech backwater, fourteen months from Terra. Lorgar saw the crack in Horus, and attempted, before it was too late, to replace him as the ascendant instrument of Chaos. This effort to depose the Warmaster did not end well, because Lorgar had made Horus too strong. Too strong to stand aside.

So Lorgar was banished. Excommunicated. Though a proportion of his host stands at Terra, to see what good can be salvaged from the Warmaster’s imminent triumph, Lorgar is here, in exile.

Lorgar’s Dark Apostle remains hopeful. Erebus, so often an outsider, but now the nominal commander of the XVII Legion on Terra since Layak’s demise, has always been extraordinarily focused and precise. Erebus claims, in missives sent via the reflections in votive bowls of water, and sometimes blood, that Horus may yet prevail.

Not in killing Lorgar’s father and conquering Terra. That is a forgone, ordained outcome.

No, in becoming that which Lorgar hoped he would become. An instrument of Chaos Incarnate.

Lorgar is not convinced. He remains quite certain that Horus is too strong to stand aside, but too weak to succeed. Erebus is more positive. He believes that Horus may yet become the instrument mankind needs, and is bending all his efforts to ensuring that result as Terra enters its final hours.

But it is a long game. Lorgar knows it, and so does Erebus. Erebus’ greatest strength is his pragmatism, so rare in those of a mystical leaning. If not this game, then the next, or the next. If not Horus, then another. All they need is that *despoiler*, to borrow a term from the largely risible arcana of tarot. A force

of fundamental change that exercises control, but is not, itself, controlled.

Even at this deepest pitch of war, fully committed, with Terra dying, Erebus sends that he has another prospect in mind, a fail-safe should Horus prove unfit. Too strong, too weak…

He won't say who. Lorgar hopes that he is the one that Erebus favours.

Lorgar wonders sometimes about Erebus. A heretic to the very last, an overturner of false truths, Erebus is the most wonderful instrument, and has achieved so very much. It was thanks to Erebus, more than anyone else, that Lorgar managed to see past the Imperial Truth he had reached, so he could peel back the layers and find better truths beneath. Erebus is the sanest man Lorgar has ever known.

But in order to accomplish his work, Erebus is ferociously cunning. The two of them have often had bitter differences, and they are only aligned now for the greater good. Lorgar wonders if the Apostle can be trusted. Truly trusted. Surely he can? Lorgar would have been told, by now, if there were lies hidden beneath Erebus' truth. The Old Four would have warned him.

In the last few days, Yssimae's harvest of divination has turned a little sour. The omens of astragalomancy have become dubious as the dice are rolled. Belomancy has missed its target. Arithromancy no longer adds up. Lorgar knows what it is, of course. The Triumph of Ruin, the fall of Terra – such an event, even fourteen light months away, is so severe, its shockwaves perturb the warp. Several times today already, Lorgar has been told of a helpless, crippled wretch ascending the throne. If that is all that remains of Horus Lupercal when he has taken Terra, then he will be too weak for anything.

Ever the same. Too strong, too weak. Horus was a fool's choice.

At least, if they are true readings, a helpless wretch upon a throne will be easy to unseat.

Lorgar finds himself longing for clarity. He knows the truth, now. The Old Four, without doubt, will build the future that Lorgar wishes for mankind. He just needs to know the means by which that future can be properly manifested. What was the word Gurat said? ‘Clean.’ Yes. The birth of the new age will be messy, a turmoil of neverness churned up by birth-pangs. But then it must be washed clean.

He needs to peel the layers and find out how the Old Four want him to do that, because it won’t be long before the blood and pain are over, and he returns from exile.

Yssmic youths approach him as he comes in through the town gates, eleomancers with flasks of holy oil, and phytognomists with fresh garlands of flowers for Lorgar’s brow. Their laughter greets him.

‘Urizen! Urizen! An angel is dead!’ they announce excitedly in the local tongue, a language that Lorgar has quickly mastered.

‘An angel, indeed?’ Lorgar asks, hiding his smile by bowing so they can crown him with the flowers.

‘Fallen from the heaven, Urizen, his wings torn! Rage follows! It is read and we have seen it! It signifies much!’

‘Such as?’ Lorgar asks.

‘The Emperor will die!’ they exclaim, laughing. ‘This Master of Mankind you told us of, the one who took the throne without asking, he will die today! We have read it!’

Lorgar smiles back, delighted. He takes out his knife.

It’s time for haruspicy to peel those layers and reveal the truth.

Then fire, the local speciality, just to be certain.

PART NINE

A CARD, DESPOILER

9:i

Red and Black

The Angel's eyes are open, afterwards.

They stare, but at what? A squandered past, an unmoving present, a stolen future? It is hard to tell. There is no recrimination in the gaze. It is more like shock, the first instant of surprise.

Of course, there is no art to reading meaning in the physiognomy of the dead as there is with the living. The eyes of the dead all tell the same story, and it is one of vacancy. Whatever their eyes may suggest, it is no more than a myth.

The Angel's eyes are fixed and dilated. Pinpoint petechia mark the conjunctivae like freckles. The gaze has the empty, slack sightlessness of extinction, eyes open not to see, but simply because they are not closed. There is no point of focus. Beads of blood cling to his eyelashes like cabochon rubies, but no blink will ever come, not even when they drop upon the cornea.

If he could see anything at all, it would be the film of blood, but he sees nothing, not even the permutations and configurations, for there are none left, nor even his dreams and visions, which have deserted him, along with his body heat and breath.

His dreams, his visions, scatter outwards, for he has no further use for them, and they are no longer his to own. They whizz away from him, like shrapnel from a detonation and, like shrapnel, they are sharp and lethal. The fragments are edged with his pain, his hope, his regret, his anger. Though he does not intend them to, they will cause great and lasting harm.

Where they land, where they hit, they will do damage.

For the second time in this un-hour, a radiating shockwave passes across the mangled realm of Terra. It is not the astronomical exhalation of near divinity that rocked creation when the mantle of the Dark King was rejected.

It is more like the blistering flash of a nail bomb.

Few notice it. Few are aware. Few are even touched. The Neverborn feel it. They wince, and flinch, and some perish as they are struck, but most are laughing anyway. A death like this is rare and sweet, and must be savoured even if it kills them too.

But the Angel's sons? Every single one of them is caught in the blast.

Raldoron's hearts stop for eight beats. His blood freezes, then ignites. A spasm lashes through him from head to toe, as though he has been cracked like a whip, and he collapses against the black adamantine doors of the Great Atrium, doors that, a moment before, he was trying to claw open.

The pain is sudden, and so complete that Raldoron is unable to consider the mystery of its origin. He slides down the doors, his fingertips leaving scratches in the black metal. Ikasati and Khoradal rush to him, and as they turn him, and see the sightless staring of his eyes and the wordless straining of his jaw, they fear the worst: the action of some assassin or some undetected enemy, poison, disease, a seizing affliction.

Then the worst hits them too, and they convulse and fall as their First Captain fell, writhing and gasping. Across the punctured floor of the *Vengeful Spirit*'s Great Atrium, the Blood Angels of the Anabasis company, sons of Sanguinius all, collapse in turn, brought down by shared pain as surely as by any mass-reactive round. Their bodies thrash and contort, hammering the broken deck. Weapons discharge by accident. Standards and banners topple from spasming hands.

Their screams fill, and then shred the air.

Raldoron sees none of this. He sees agony, manifesting as a great, red, pumping sac that fills his vision. He sees loss as the

air that his lungs refuse to draw. He sees anguish as the edge of a keening blade. He sees grief as claws that close and knife him whole.

He sees a burning battlement. He sees the sky on fire forever. He sees his Lord Sanguinius broken across a daemon's spike, pinned face-upwards like a specimen butterfly. He sees the scarlet blood, in quantities beyond measure, blood that is both his and his lord's, and it makes him thirst.

He sees rage. Rage is black.

Taerwelt Ikasati sees blood on his eyelashes that won't blink away. He is face down. He stares because he cannot *not*. He screams, because he is only a scream. He sees his Bright Lord felled to his knees by a spike-hooked falchion, guts dragged into the air. He sees the wicked blade rise again to hack the kneeling corpse apart. All that is red becomes black. All that is black becomes rage.

Sarodon Sacre's sight explodes. He sees the visions of his lord, and they sear his eyes. Pain peppers him like flying glass. He sees a grim tower of the lost, a tower overflowing with the roar of howling. He sees the name *Amareo* writ in blood. He sees a company of death, all dressed in black, a bloody saltire on their shoulders. He sees their priests, and hears the chanting of their *moripatris*. Their faces are skulls. They open their arms to welcome him.

His rage, like their vestments, is black.

Khoradal Furio sees Sanguinius torn apart by petulant gods. The gods are vast, hunched and obese, half-cloaked in the endless night from which they have been called. They are the size of continents, of moons, of solar realms. They sit and pick the tiny golden figure apart, twisting off limbs to gnaw upon like the drumsticks of poultry. They chuckle, and they teeth-strip bones. Their feasting is inevitable. It has been foreseen and ordained in dreams and visions. Khoradal tastes his lord's pain in the mouths of the gods, he tastes his lord's blood on their lips. He tastes the blackness of the rage.

He becomes the rage.

In the Great Atrium, his power fist is clamped around Raldoron's throat.

The rage expands, breathless, bloodthirsty, unquenchable. It takes hold of every brother in the IX. It is a flaw of their gene-seed, a legacy of their Insanguination, a consuming lust like the thirst that they have concealed in their shame. But it is more than the thirst, more than the corruption of modified genes, more than the yearning hunger of hyperactive omophagae, more than the mutagenic, irradiated birthright of Baal. It is an insanity, unlocked by the death of Sanguinius, an empathic torment that flashes his life and his murder before their eyes, so they share in his memories, his dreams fulfilled and unfulfilled, his visions realised and unrealised, his nightmares.

Every permutation of his pain. Every configuration of his fate. Every scintilla of his suffering.

Now and forever.

The Blood Angels erupt across the tortured farscape of Terra. Their fury is uncontainable. They become senseless things, beyond reason, control utterly lost. With their heads suddenly ablaze with tormenting, hand-me-down dreams, they fall on those around them.

All of the IX Legion Blood Angels are in the field. At this fateful, final hour, where else would they be? Almost every one of them is already engaged with the traitor host when the rage hits. Their enemies become their prey. Skills, techniques, tactics, even weapons are abandoned. The exquisite martial prowess that distinguishes the IX evaporates in seconds. Mindless and feral, they kill everything around them, destroying with their hands and teeth traitors who were, moments before, holding them at bay with blade and shield.

In their insanity, the Blood Angels are no longer able to differentiate foe from friend. It is not just the blood of traitors that spills.

The Angels scream. The screaming fills the world. The sound of Angels screaming is something no man should ever hear.

Kystos Gaellon is on the remains of Marmax South, Section 52, Hold Point 78, when his father dies. He's been there for thirty-five minutes. That time is an estimate, and he's not entirely sure how he got there.

He hears a scream. He has no idea that it's coming from him.

Malix Hest does not see the Orion gunship. He is insensible to its violent crash-landing, or the skill with which Ios Raja has managed to bring it down on the Aegeus Concourse. The craft, one engine bitten off and its golden hull stippled with claw-marks, leaves a ninety-metre scar across the rockcrete. Only the Sentinel's expertise and post-human strength prevents its outright disintegration. It sits askew, bent over to port, in the litter of its own debris. Raja ejects the hatch, and he and the legionaries Conort and Kumo help to pull the dazed Hassan and the Sisters clear of the wreck.

Hest is aware of none of this. A second before impact, the rage came upon him. He sees a rain of blood, and a distant tower that seems to beckon to him from some forsaken future. He sees his primarch lord beaten to the deck by a world-breaking maul, a relentless hail of blows that snap and crush and fill the air with bloody spray. He sees the black pit of the rage yawn wide to swallow him. He sees nothing else.

He does not see Ibelin Kumo of the White Scars tumble to the ground, thrown backwards in his attempts to restrain. He does not see the incredulous face of the Praetorian Fist Guil Conort as his throat is torn out and his head twisted off. He does not see Hassan of the Chosen fall back in abject horror at the sight of a raging Blood Angel tearing out of the gunship's hatchway, gore trailing from his hands and spilling from his mouth.

He does not see Ios Raja, his expression appalled, as he lunges forward to protect the Chosen One. He does not see Raja's thrusting spear. Malix Hest does not even feel the spear-tip go into him, or understand that he is killed.

He is not even able to appreciate that his death is, in fact, a relief.

Nassir Amit sees red. Actual red, as though blood has coated his eyes, as though blood has covered his corneas. The rage is instant and absolute. He breaks from the formations that are trying to hold Marnix Confluence, not backwards in flight, like so many Excertus and Auxilia have done in the past few minutes, but stumbling forwards, blind, towards the enemy onslaught. Around him, Imperial Fists and White Scars yell his name in disbelief. Hemheda Khan bellows at Amit to stop.

Amit is oblivious. He utters no scream, and makes no sound. He is blood-blind, and everything in him, including his own identity, has been reduced to a tiny blackened ingot, a coal of pure, dense rage, like the compressed heart of a supermassive black sun.

There is no sound. The world is silenced. Inside his own red darkness, Amit sees images flutter across the surface of that spinning coal of rage. He sees blood drops clinging to eyelashes. He sees an empty stare that will never blink and react. He sees blood on crumpled golden plate, and a face washed in gore, a face that is half-lifted off the bone, the flesh hanging loose. He knows the face.

He sees the daemon-forms, black poppets and homunculae, that prattle and grin as they drag the heavy carcass across a bloody deck, and prop it up, and pin it, like some trophy, to the wall of an abominable black cathedral. He sees the iron nails as they are driven in, through meat, wrists, palms, shoulders, hips, throat, wings.

He starts to run, in rage, outrage, disbelief and horror. He is screaming now. The daemonic things, both those in his head and those surging down the Western Mass Passageway, see him coming. Like him, they register disbelief. Like him, they start to scream.

His sword, already wet with Neverborn ichor, is as thirsty as he is. It starts to feed. Blow follows blow. It splits skulls. It severs bones. It slices meat. It carves daemon-skin.

It tears flesh.

Zealis Varens has already lost an arm and the sight in one eye when he loses his sanity too. Cornered by Death Guard on the Via Atmosine, he is the last man standing of the four loyalist squads left to hold the thoroughfare. His visor is punctured by a bloody crater, and his severed arm is a stub of meat and bare bone protruding from broken plate. The wounds are nothing to the wound in his mind.

Close by the ransacked Fratery, Satel Aimery falls from the sky. The blood in his own veins revolts him, and is also in revolt. The traitor-foes rush in upon him, assuming he has been brought down at last by a lucky shot. He has repelled their assaults for too long, driving them back, heaping up a mound of their dead, and repulsing their attempts to penetrate this narrow channel of the field. Now, at last, he seems to fall, and they pour in to overwhelm him and butcher him.

But they recoil as he rears up. They recoil from the fury that spills out of him like scalding steam from a volcanic vent. They see a look upon his face that is far more than the grim resolve of a noble warrior cornered.

They see insanity, the wild flash of an inhuman carnivore.

They do not see what he sees. And though they are about to die, torn to tatters and exsanguinated by a fury they could never have imagined, they should be thankful to be spared that vision, at least.

Khotus Meffiel drops the storm shield and bent lance that he picked up when his sword shattered. The Sons of Horus assailing him think he's mad, and that his casting away of weapons is some sign of submission. They are right; it is submission and he is mad. His madness is a black mosaic of a thousand possible deaths, and his submission is not to them.

They are absolutely not ready for his hands, or his teeth.

Emhon Lux, in his madness, tries to pull himself free from the lifter-throne that supports him. It feels to him as though the chair systems are pumping poison rage into his body instead of

opiates, and the opiates ran dry hours ago, anyway. His all-consuming pain seems to twist and transmute, becoming another quality of pain that is entirely different and somehow far greater. He thought he had come to terms with the agony he was obliged to dwell in, but he cannot endure this new form. His agony was red, and this is black. His thirst was terrible, now it is an engulfing hunger. He thrashes to get out of the chair. He yanks pipes and plugs out of his skin. He wrestles to escape his own body, because there is now so much pain in it, there is no room left for him.

Hellflame burns his veins. Despair brands his brain. He hears a nine-beat chant not meant for the air and, in time to its Kairic rhythm, he sees a daemon's hammer fall, striking, as regular and relentless as a working ironsmith at an anvil. He sees what it is beating out; the auramite plate, the pulping flesh, the white feathers, snapped and torn, the bloody clumps of wrenched-out golden hair.

He needs to stand. He needs to fight, he needs to stop the atrocity. Pain and jet-black rage pin him, and will not let him rise.

The frenetic tempo of the battle shifts. Only a veteran would notice it amid such unabated intensity. But Rann does, as a conductor might notice one musician in his orchestra mistime a note during a grandiose symphonic finale. The rhythm of war slips a step.

Rann can't work out why. There isn't an opportunity to assess. It is taking every iota of his concentration and stamina to cling on to his little patch of Terra. Spilled blood has saturated the ground beneath him to such an extent that it has become a red mire, a lurid crimson quicksand, and if not for the heap of corpses that he occupies like a castaway on a rocky atoll, he would have sunk to his hips. His twin axes maintain their rhythm. He cleaves the visor of a World Eater, and cracks the chest of a Cthonic Terminator. Horus will not win this. The world will have drowned in blood before ever that infamous victory occurs.

He strikes aside a power-adze, and breaks a spear mid-haft. He ducks the thrust of a bill-hook, and shears *Hunter* through the ribs and spine of a gharial-snouted Neverborn, then swings to face the Death Guard brute whose bill-hook missed the first time. A frothing World Eater and a horned, cernunnos devil clamber up the corpse hill to assail him from behind, but he has two axes, and his combat-awareness has never been more pure and focused. *Headsman*, true to its name, takes off the Death Guard's head, and it comes loose, spinning, in a hose of gore. *Hunter* whistles into the horned thing's sternum, and opens its ribs like a clam shell. It topples backwards, and the wide span of its thorned antlers catches the World Eater and drags him with it into the blood-mire below.

Rann's twin axes maintain their rhythm, but he is out of time now. War's cadence has definitely changed. Rann presumes that this is the end, that so few remain with him, resistance has turned to rout. He–

Something knocks him off the mound of bodies. The impact is numbing. Struggling to rise, floundering in the liquid mud, he sees the winged monster that has overthrown him. It crouches on the crest of the corpse-hill that Rann had claimed as his own, and is pawing towards him on all fours, wings spread, eyes bright, clawing over drenched plate and tangled limbs.

It is growling, a deep, infrasonic purr of menace. Its fangs are vast, the dentition of a carnodon, fit to rip the throat from a helpless antelope. Rann is the antelope.

It is, he understands, the most appalling and lethal monster he has faced in a day of monsters. Rann knows this, quite plainly, from two things: its homicidal intent is beyond question.

And it is Azkaellon.

9:ii

Horus awaits

She tells him his brother is dead. He looks down at her, his eyes slightly narrowed.

‘Which one?’ he asks.

‘The Angel,’ she replies. She waits, expecting anger, half-expecting him to strike her for delivering such ill tidings.

But all he says is, ‘How do you know?’

She tells him she felt it. He stares at her a little longer. He knows what she is. He can see the witch in her. She half-expects him to kill her for that too.

‘Can you stand?’ Dorn asks her.

She tries. She can, barely. Her limbs feel new, soft, weak. Under the heap of stones, she has died too many times, and lived again too hastily. Her body, her whole being, is still trying to mend and renew itself. Everything feels unfamiliar and untried. She must remind herself how to stand, relearn how to walk, and somehow clear the dust filling her throat. Every word she’s spoken to him has been a dry rattle. She’s just a dishevelled thing in ragged black, caked in dried blood, and so covered with talc-like dust it looks like she has been prepared for some ritual.

She must learn to use her mind again too. The crushing agonies and repeated deaths of her entombment reduced her to an almost insentient state. Only the piercing shard of Sanguinius’ death, and the blizzard of death-visions it contained, managed to penetrate and register at all. She has no idea what else has happened, or how long she has been buried.

She tries to stabilise and recalibrate, but her mind is too frail, and the unstable fury of the warp-state around them and the

warp storm overhead is too great. But she can tell that the blighting cosmic stain of the Dark King is somehow gone. While she was busy dying, that apocalyptic shadow has vanished.

'What else can you feel?' Dorn asks her. He seems like a giant to her. She knows all primarchs exceed the stature of men or Astartes, but the scale and bulk of the Praetorian seems even greater than it should be.

She shakes her head.

'Nothing,' she says. 'Nothing else. The warp is too loud. This place…'

'It's Chaos' own realm,' he replies. It feels like a simple, tactical assessment, as though he is considering the options of a field of war. 'I know which way to go,' he adds, 'but it would be useful to know what awaits me.'

She asks him how he knows the way, and he doesn't reply, but she can read the answer in his mind. A call. A cry, from his father. A summons. The Emperor is in danger. From that, she reasons, the Emperor must have disposed of his almighty power, or had it taken from him.

She can also read that Dorn doesn't trust her. He has no idea what or who she is, or with which side of this war her allegiance lies. But he is pragmatic, the most pragmatic mind she has ever encountered.

'Can you try?' he asks. 'Try… *harder*? It's important.'

He needs intel. He needs to be able to make a plan. Her own plans are in pieces. She has neither the strength nor the assets to accomplish her purpose. All that she desired coming here is lost to her. But Dorn, this earnest, solemn soul, shaped by the very wars he has designed, still has an opportunity to achieve something worthwhile. Some work of noble note may yet be done.

'What?' he asks, puzzled, as if he has heard her thoughts.

She says it aloud, and tells him it's a line from an old verse, a very old verse, that somehow just slid into her, as though carried there by the warp-winds of the wasteland.

'"Some work of noble note may yet be done, not unbecoming men that strove with Gods."'

He frowns, and says he knows it. He knows it as a work by a lord named Alfred, a philosopher of the archaic times she thought everyone had forgotten. Then he recites the end of the same verse.

We are not now the strength which in old days

Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are;

One equal temper of heroic hearts,

Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will

To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

There is a look of mild surprise on his face as he says the lines, as though he is perplexed that he knows them. The wasteland wind has brought them to him too, she thinks. He starts to say that he believes he knows the poem from a lecture given by an iterator, years ago. He says he attended many. He thinks it may have been one given by Sindermann, because he can hear the words in Sindermann's voice. Or is it a woman?

He stops, realising that at some point during his awkward explanation, she has started to cry. Sobs wrack her, making her shudder, and tears stream down her face, washing streaks in the floury dust coating her cheeks. He's not sure what to do. He's painfully not good at comfort. He reaches out a huge armoured hand, a hand that has lifted tonnes of rock off her, but can't bring himself to touch her, knowing that a touch of that hand would not be soothing.

She wipes her eyes, and finds a broken smile, and tells him not to worry. It's just the trauma.

'Can you try?' he asks.

She nods. She closes her eyes, and lets her mind sink and settle. She ignores the tears, the effort of standing, the molten ache in her joints. She ignores the bloody pain of her torn hands, and the throb of her missing fingernails. She ignores the crust of dust coating her gullet and windpipe, and the ailing sigh of her lungs.

She gathers her strength, and slowly begins to explore the site around them, the slopes of fractured stone, the redundant walls, the drifts and dunes of ash, the Astartes corpses jumbled like toppled statues in the rubble. She figures, as though her mind is quickly sketching it, the time-lacked city surrounding them. It has no plan or scheme, and it tastes of primitive matter, of age so great that exposure to the warp has left it bleached and arid. It smells of stories, like an old and secret library, but the stories are so ancient they have all been forgotten. No–

'What?' Dorn asks.

She shakes her head, still concentrating.

Not forgotten. The stories weren't told, once upon a time, and then forgotten. They were forgotten long before they were told. She can sense the curvature of the universe's cyclic nature.

It hurts. Her mind is still frail, and its neuroplasticity raw. The city bites at her as she tries to read it. It doesn't want to be known, or measured, or mapped. She persists, her mental radius expanding. She sees the wasteland, boundless and bare, the lone and level sands, the oceans of dust that have submerged other cities, the boulder fields as stark as lunar regolith, the bright pinks and crimsons of exposed coral reefs like knotted, calcified fungus, the wrecks and ruins, the abraded statues of dead gods who long to have their names remembered. She perceives the ghost of Terra, a fading imprint of matter, subsumed within the titanic irruption of the warp that is devouring it to fashion a new world from its atoms. She sees the last few pieces of the material world – a

bridge, a wall, a gate, a tower – poking into view like dirt in a wound.

The warp is everywhere. The noise of it is like a drone, like endless thunder or the roar of an inferno. It spits and crackles, and every spit is a Neverborn hiss, and every crackle is an inhuman whisper.

The warp is all around them, an immense cyclonic storm pattern of neverness, like a funeral wreath. And at the heart of it, in the eye of that storm, there is a gloom that stinks of cadaverine and putrescene. A lightless thing glares back at her with a single, bloodshot–

Her hand snaps out. Dorn takes it, and steadies her.

'Horus,' she says. 'Horus awaits. He is eager. He has accepted the manifold gifts of Chaos. He is Chaos Undivided, the perfect instrument, the perfect vessel. He has won. He is simply waiting to finish the last few who oppose him. He is waiting for your father. He is waiting for you.'

'Alone?' Dorn asks.

She looks at him and laughs.

'That's all you can say?' she says. 'Is he alone, or with others? Does he have an army at his side? Yes, he's alone. But I'm telling you it doesn't matter. He is all things. He is all-powerful. He doesn't need allies now, or soldiers, or disciples. He is Chaos, and its gods dwell within him.'

Dorn nods, as though this is simply a bleak strategic update from an unfavourable battlefront. He still doesn't get it. He's still trying to fabricate viable tactics.

He lets go of her arm, and unstakes his sword from the ground.

'You don't understand,' she says.

'Probably better that I don't,' he replies.

'You can't defeat him. Not in any of the ways you have learned to calculate victory and defeat. You can't beat him. No

one can.'

'I can try,' he says.

He looks at her.

'My brother? He's really dead?' he asks.

'Yes.'

He nods. 'Horus killed him?'

'Yes,' she says. 'I felt it. He fought, to the very end. It wasn't enough.'

'We rise together, we fall together,' he replies. 'If that's all we can do, then it is enough.'

He turns away. He's going now.

'You'll die too,' she says.

'There's no place for me in his world,' he says. 'It's better this way. To try, I mean.'

He looks back at her.

'Can you summon help?' he asks. 'With that gift of yours? Will anybody hear you?'

'Not from here,' she says. 'I'm not strong enough. The warp is too loud. It would drown me out.'

'Then,' he says, 'can you go back? Find a way back? Get out from under this storm and, I don't know, find a place to call from? A place where your voice might be heard?'

'Perhaps,' she says. 'Who would I call to?'

'Anyone,' Dorn replies. 'Anyone who is left. Any one of us still standing. No other fight matters now, no other battle, no other front line. If anyone is still alive, they need to come here now and stand with me. There are no other priorities, not even the Palace.'

'I'll try,' she says. She wants to say something else, but there's nothing left.

'I'll try,' she repeats.

‘Good,’ he says. He reaches up to the breast of his dust-streaked plate, and unclasps one of the seals of his Praetorian office. He holds it out to her. ‘In case anyone doubts the authority of your message,’ he explains.

She takes the seal. It’s heavy. She imagines that every part of his duty and office are heavy.

‘You haven’t even asked me,’ she says, ‘if I’m on your side.’

He shrugs.

‘It doesn’t really matter,’ he replies. ‘If you are, you’ll try. If you’re not, then all I’ve wasted is my breath.’

She watches him walk away. Once he’s out of sight, she turns and, step by step, starts to look for a way back out of the storm.

9:iii

Controlled extirpation

A muted buzzer sounds three times.

Andromeda-17 glances at Xanthus.

‘What was that?’ she asks.

The Chosen shrugs, frowning. He’s too busy watching Fo at work to pay her full attention. The old fleshcrafter has been furiously busy for the past hour, moving around the Sigillite’s laboratorium as though it’s his own. He’s running comparative data across six cogitators, and loading samples from the main genetic fabricators into small ceramite flasks for transfer into the analysers. Every few minutes, he scurries up the stairs into the upper levels of the workspace to check on the vats, then returns with more data and patterning wafers. He is gleeful, flushed, and utterly absorbed in his labour. He hasn’t stopped muttering to himself (I find I enjoy conversations the most when I conduct them with a peer).

Andromeda crosses to a systems monitor built into the tower’s curving wall at the top of the stairs. Various runes have lit up. She cross-checks.

‘Auto-defences,’ she says. ‘Xanthus? Do you hear me? The Retreat’s auto-defences have been activated. Shields and perimeter. Repulse. Lethal settings…’

‘It must have been Amon,’ Xanthus replies, still watching Fo work.

She nods. ‘Which means the enemy is very close,’ she says. ‘The Custodian wouldn’t have activated the systems and then let them idle, wasting power. He’d wait to the last minute. The very last.’

She hurries halfway down the stairs towards the floor below. There's a window there. She peers out, but she can't see the front of the Retreat, or Amon down below. She can see part of the city skyline. She can see the flames engulfing Palace structures on the other side of the Pons Aegeus span.

She goes back up to the lab.

'You should check,' says Xanthus. 'If it's a malfunction, Amon should know. Or if it's…'

He trails off, and looks pointedly at Fo, who carries on working, oblivious to their conversation.

If he's done something. Some trick.

Andromeda nods. She was thinking the same. A distraction. A final ploy.

'Watch him,' she tells Xanthus, nodding at the prisoner. She heads for the stairs. Fo suddenly turns to look at her.

'While you're down there,' he says, 'you can tell the Custodian that I'm almost done. Just another ten or fifteen minutes to verify the mass expression samples.'

'You're finished?' she says.

'Yes.'

'And it… it works?'

'I assume so. Hence the verification,' Fo replies (don't these people understand simple words?). 'But I am confident that the weapon is complete and functional. The *improved* weapon, I should say. The phage now takes into account everything I have learned from Malcador's research.'

He affectionately pats a disorderly pile of notebooks and slates on the workbench beside him. Stray pages and crumpled notes spill out.

'He really was the most clever man,' Fo says (I regret ever scorning the Sigillite's genius. And He should have listened to him much more closely. Malcador's demise is a true loss to the Imperial Project). 'Anyway, the phage has been synthesised in

a generic form. It can be simply encoded, via splice markers, to target–'

'I don't care about the specifics,' says Andromeda. 'Are you confirming the work is complete?'

'I am,' says Fo (was I unclear?). 'So tell Amon. I imagine he will need to acquire authorisation to use the weapon. Which, I presume, means the Throne Room. So he'll have to start thinking about how we get ourselves, and the weapon, out of here.'

Andromeda glances at Xanthus.

'Unless,' says Fo, with a shrug, 'Amon is content to make the decision to deploy it himself?'

'No,' says Xanthus firmly. 'He will need authority. Lord Vulkan's authority.'

'Of course,' says Fo. 'Then he had better plan our extraction. Getting to the Throne Room, or even contacting the Throne Room, won't be easy.'

He stares at them both, and scowls.

'I thought you'd look a little more pleased,' he grumbles. 'We've done it.' (Well, I've done it. You were watching when it happened.) 'Though the hour is late, and the situation beyond perilous, we can now end and *win* this war.'

He waits for a reaction. Andromeda stares at him, grim-faced. Xanthus swallows hard.

'No applause?' Fo asks. 'No congratulation? This is salvation. Salvation for the human race. A salvation that the Emperor Himself could not achieve.' (If I do say so myself, and I do.)

'It may be victory,' says Andromeda quietly. 'It may *mean* victory. But it's still genocide.'

'I prefer the term "controlled extirpation",' Fo replies sourly. 'But I suppose that's just a euphemism. We should call it what it is. Genocide. But I ask you this… Would you rather be a

victim of genocide, or the architect of a genocide that saves you?'

'Fo–' she growls.

'Which I believe, by the by, is a guiding philosophy of the Imperial Project.'

'Just finish the damn verification,' she snaps. She looks at Xanthus. 'I'll be back as quickly as I can.'

She hurries away. They can hear her footsteps, running, as she descends the staircases. Fo turns back to his work, and scans the columns of data playing across the monitors.

'If you're lying about any of this,' Xanthus begins. He's stepped forward to stand right behind Fo's chair.

'Oh, Xanthus…'

'This isn't a game,' says Xanthus. 'You're treating it like a game. An amusing intellectual exercise. You are a wretched man–'

'A wretched man who has *saved your precious Imperium*,' Fo corrects him archly.

'Billions will die,' Xanthus says quietly. 'Trillions. This weapon–'

'Trillions will die either way,' says Fo. 'If we use it, or we don't, trillions will die. There is now, at last, a chance. A chance that mankind will survive and prevail. Whatever you think of me, I love the human race. I do not wish to see its extinction. And may I remind you of something that you have seen for yourself? What we face, and what we are now on the verge of obliterating… is not human. If it ever was, it has long since ceased to be.'

Fo glances sidelong at the Chosen (this man Xanthus, and the Selenar too, both of them so squeamish. They have no grasp of what the truly great must do to achieve their goals).

'I am not ashamed of this weapon,' he adds. 'I'm proud of what I've done. I am your Emperor's oldest adversary, His

fiercest detractor. I have opposed His Great Plan since He first began to execute it. He has tried to end me, and silence me, many times. Yet now, He needs me. Now, *my* way of engineering the future will prove the more efficacious.'

He smiles. Xanthus hates that smile.

'If you're lying about any of this, Fo, *any* of it,' Xanthus growls, 'this weapon, what it does–'

'I am not,' says Fo firmly (the very thought!). 'My lies,' he says, 'are entirely confined to other matters.'

'What does that mean?' asks Xanthus.

Fo suddenly has him by the throat with one of his thin, bird-claw hands. How the old man moved so fast, Xanthus has no idea. He's already blacking out. Fo's thumb and index finger are shutting his carotids.

'Now my work is done,' Fo hisses (there is no longer any need for a cordial demeanour), 'I wish to depart. I was entirely committed to the work, Xanthus, for in it lay my own salvation. But now it's finished, I intend to make good my escape from this place, and from all of you. Do what you will with the weapon. I am now leaving.'

Like all of the Chosen, Xanthus has been well trained in personal defence. Before his blood-starved brain fails him entirely, he snaps his forearm up, wraps Fo's reedy limb, and twists.

Fo yelps in pain, and rocks sideways out of his seat. Xanthus staggers back, gasping and wheezing, the choke-hold broken. Fo comes at him, throwing quick jabs with his hard, wizened knuckles. His knowledge of human anatomy is deep and thorough. Each strike hits a nerve point, paralysing Xanthus' left arm and right leg. The Chosen sways, unbalanced, and crashes into the workbench, scattering notes and data-slates. He manages to grip the edge of the bench, and lash out with his left foot, sweeping Fo's legs as the old man attempts to run. Fo thumps onto the floor so hard it seems as if he must have broken every thin bird-bone in his scrawny body.

Xanthus levers himself upright, coughing and panting. He reaches forward to pin the old man. Fo is clearly far stronger and more resilient than he appears, as though his feeble body is actually composed of steel, cunningly disguised to appear decrepit. He kicks out a heel, and demolishes Xanthus' left knee. Xanthus collapses, sprawling wide-eyed beside Fo on the lab floor. Fo turns to look at him, as though they are lying in bed side by side.

'Nice try.' He smiles.

He raises his hand. Xanthus has no idea where the old man got the surgical scalpel from.

But Fo is ramming it at his throat.

9:iv

The path of glory

Seventeen minutes and thirteen seconds into the fight. Constantin has lost three more men, but he has gained a foothold on the fallen orbital plate's ragged escarpment. The approach routes through the ruins to the edge of the plate are thick with traitors of the XVI and XVII Legions, and still more defend the mangled gantries and exposed deck layers at the structure's lower end. Enough to hold off any army. The astute combination of the XVI's intense discipline and the XVII's zealous fury is punishing Constantin's far smaller force mercilessly.

But his men are Legio Custodes, and far more than men. The filth he is fighting are mere Astartes, and far, far less.

Constantin scales the crumpled hull plates in the shadow of one of the plate's remaining suspension engines, a huge drum the size of a bastion tower that is slanted to the left, its base half-buried in the ground. The orbital plate fell hard when it fell. Mass-reactives and las-bolts slice the air around him. Traitors, high above, are trying to knock him off the metal cliff, their angle of fire almost vertical.

The orbital plate is little more than a lump of wreckage, albeit one almost two kilometres square and half a kilometre thick. It is dead and destroyed, partially burned-out, and has no obvious strategic significance. But it's being defended for a reason. The Word Bearers may be frenzied and unthinking, but the Sons of Horus are most surely not.

The Emperor's war cry originated from this vicinity. Valdor's King-of-Ages could be inside the structure. The Warmaster could be inside it. Abaddon certainly is.

Horus' First Captain is a head worth taking. Constantin wants Abaddon dead. And before he dies, Constantin wants Abaddon

talking. If anyone knows the location of the thrice-damned first-found, it will be Ezekyle Abaddon.

A Word Bearers Cataphractii appears on a ledge just metres above Constantin, his heavy cannon whirring as it angles down to splash Valdor off the artificial cliff. Constantin thrusts upwards with his spear. Clean and true, the weapon punches through an overhanging lip of sheared hull, and impales the Word Bearer leaning over it. Blood showers out of his punctured breast plating, and fire blooms out of his back. The Apollonian Spear has ruptured the heavy armour's power plant. The blast takes off one side of the bulky traitor. As the burning, incomplete body plunges past him, Valdor clambers over the lip of hull, and frees the spear. He's on an internal deck level now. The orbital plate was sheared through like a geological sample, its deck layers exposed. The deck slopes up ahead of him at a sharp angle, distorted by impact. The walls are buckled.

He starts to advance, without hesitation. He has Abaddon's tag in clear view on his helm display. Ten metres in, two more Word Bearers and a Sons of Horus legionary appear to intercept him. He slays one of the XVII with a swift, underarm thrust, but mass-reactives from the other two detonate against his left shoulder and ribs, and slam him into the hallway wall. He tastes blood and pain. They may be children to him, but their weapons bite. He knows they could kill him if they tried hard enough.

And they are trying very hard.

A blinding beam of Adrathics sears past him, and blows his two aggressors into jellied shrapnel. Ludovicus and Erastes have gained access behind him. Wordlessly, they take the lead, and he falls in behind them. Erastes' Adrathic demolishes the blast hatches that the traitors have tried to close to compartmentalise the plate's internal structure. What are they hiding here? What are the traitors trying to defend?

Stablising his injuries, Valdor follows his men up the crumpled hallway. They break through into a large gallery

where the deck is canted up at a thirty-degree angle.

Erastes dies just seconds after they enter. He is blitzed by heavy fire that even a Custodian could not survive. Justaerin Terminators, black shapes so bulked by their heavy plate they seem as big as the Custodes, close from all sides.

Clever, thinks Constantin. *Bait and ambush*. First Captain Abaddon has lost none of his flair. There's nothing hidden inside the orbital plate except death. Constantin disembowels one of the Terminators, then uses the corpse as a shield as he rushes the rest. In seconds, it's close quarters, a churning brawl. Ludovicus is mobbed by five of the Justaerin, his blade hacking to fend them off. Eight more close on Constantin. One, tag-marked Otun Rindol, a notorious brute, clips Constantin with his power fist. Constantin reels, spitting blood and broken teeth, his helm deformed and pushed into his cheek. A chainblade saws into his right hip. He feels his plate and flesh shudder as it chews deep. Flecks of gold and bloody tissue spray out. He blanks the pain. He has no time for it. Pain is just pain, and it comes weighted with shock and hesitation. He puts the haft of the spear into the side of Rindol's head hard enough to fracture the helmet. He grabs a second Terminator, tag-marked Lael Gustus, and turns him bodily. Gustus struggles, overpowered by Constantin's superior strength. He has the spear across Gustus' throat, and his right hand clamped on Gustus' right forearm, where the chainblade is still revving and shedding particles of Valdor's gore. He heaves the Justaerin forward and drives the chainblade into the sternum of another, tag-marked Ketron Bargaddon. The chainblade wedges so deep in the Terminator's carapace that it chokes out, shredding broken teeth and coughing a huge cloud of bloody vapour.

The air is wet. Constantin can't see Ludovicus. Something hits him across the back and neck, and he loses his grip on Gustus. He tries to turn. Hands claw at him, and seize him. A power fist clamps his throat and smashes him into a bulkhead. He's choking, his throat crushing. A blade stabs into his belly.

He feels the quick ice of it. He sees a tag-marker through the haze.

Hellas Sycar.

‘Captain Abaddon sends his regards, old man,’ says the Master of the Justaerin.

‘They won’t hold them, Ezekyle,’ says Erebus. ‘Your training and your doctrines tell you that, surely?’

They are holding position at the highest point of the orbital plate’s upper hull, well defended by the ceramite vanes of the downed structure’s remaining engine vents. Below those vanes, which rise above them like the taut sails of an ancient sea-craft, Abaddon has six squads drawn from his company and Baraxa’s, along with a less formal phalanx of veteran Word Bearers. Down-hull, where the vast, ridged and broken back of the orbital plate slopes away from them like a gentle mountain, there are rapid flashes in the gloom, and the chatter of heavy weapons. Sensoria have positively identified the assaulting formation. Custodes. Among them, Tribune Diocletian Coros, Proconsul Ludovicus, Telamok, Maezari and Valdor himself.

‘Barely thirty of them,’ Abaddon replies.

‘Yes, but they are Custodes,’ Erebus replies, ‘and they are about as highly motivated as it is possible to be. Valdor alone–’

‘We have them flanked, and pinned in crossfire and defilade,’ Abaddon says firmly. ‘We have the advantage of higher terrain and cover. We outnumber them thirty to one. We have established *Repulse Exactus* in overlap, first order *Pavis Indomitus*, and Captain Jeraddon stands ready with *Antecessum Purgatus* to lock the kill-box as soon as they are drawn in. They took my bait. Their haste in escalade will be their undoing. As for Valdor, Sycar’s Justaerin are targeting him directly. Highest prejudice.’

‘Oh, Ezekyle,’ says Erebus. ‘Still thinking like a soldier. Still acting as though good soldiering will win this. You’re not a

soldier, not any more.'

'Shut up,' says Abaddon.

'Stop thinking with your pride,' says Erebus. 'This isn't about your reputation, it's about your father. We must defend the Court against any potential interloper. And Valdor certainly qualifies.'

'The First Captain told you to shut up,' says Baraxa, but Abaddon knows the Dark Apostle is right. Tactical shows him tag-markers greying out at an alarming rate. Bargaddon and two other Justaerin have just gone dark.

'I'll kill him myself,' Abaddon declares. He hefts up his blade. 'Valdor and any other of his gilded monsters.'

'You could try,' says Erebus.

Ulnok, squad leader Fermel, and the praetor Phaeto Zeletsis stir angrily. Baraxa takes a menacing step towards the Word Bearer.

'Azelas, Azelas!' Erebus soothes. 'I am not disparaging the dear captain's prowess. A finer Astartes warrior I cannot think of. But the operative word there is "Astartes". Valdor is Custodes. Valdor is the Emperor's oldest weapon. His men, few though they may be, are killing-machines. Any one of them outclasses any one of us. Would you be foolish enough to wager on an outcome?'

'Then what do you suggest?' Baraxa snaps.

'Oh, Ezekyle knows, don't you, Ezekyle? We have other advantages, and they've got us this far. We are stronger in ways they can't imagine. Yet the First Captain is reluctant to make use of the gifts his father has supplied. All of your companies, in fact, seem hesitant to accept the path of glory. I think it's time to revise that thinking.'

Baraxa looks sharply at Abaddon. A tempest gust of the warp storm churning above soughs between the vanes with a long, slow groan. A patter of dirty rain falls across them briefly.

Control, not controlled. Abaddon can see it in his friend's eyes.

'Control, not controlled… Your little mantra,' says Erebus, playful but not quite mocking. 'It's been whispered to me. You are so cautious. I admire that, really. I'm not suggesting your submission. I have no wish to see you become a mindless terror-weapon like Ekron Fal or Vorus Ikari. I have no desire to see you degenerate like the sons of Angron or Fulgrim. But I can harness these gifts for you. You can retain control. In fact, you *must*. You are too gifted a leader to lose. Accept what I offer you, Ezekyle. Valdor will be as nothing if you do.'

'My captain will have no part of this,' says Baraxa.

'Then your captain will not be the son his father needs, Azelas,' replies Erebus with a diffident shrug. 'He will not be the son his father expects. There will be no place for him in the new age, or for you either. His resistance to the new ways is admirable. I mean it. But the old ways of warfare are no longer sufficient, nor are they adequate. Besides, he's tasted the potential already.'

'What?' says Baraxa.

'How do you suppose he found his way to the bridge decks?' asks Erebus. He looks over at Abaddon. 'You felt then the power that awaits, the power your father offers. You felt the joy of it, yet remained in *complete* control. Thus, you accomplished something you could not have otherwise done. Listen to me, all of you. I speak frankly. These rewards are yours already. They've been in your grasp since the moment you took up this cause, the moment you stood by your father, despite the fact that it meant turning your backs on the Imperium you oathed to protect. It doesn't matter how you justify that, or reconcile the choice in your minds. You stood by your father. You committed to this usurpation. You are walking the path of glory already. There's no going back, not ever.'

Baraxa stares at Abaddon.

Abaddon glares at the scarred hull. He can hear the rapid-fire exchanges echoing through the decks below him. The *Pavis Indomitus* has just broken. Valdor's killers are coming.

He doesn't want to remember the enargeia, but he can't help himself. The dopamine hit of pulling on the threads of Chaos, of turning them into reins. It obeyed him. It served him. He was the master. Control, not controlled.

'There were wrongs to right,' he murmurs. 'The Emperor used us like toys, and withheld from us. We were right to rise. But, so help me, Horus was a fool to go so far into the darkness.'

'Horus has just slain the Bright Angel,' says Erebus. 'How does that make him a fool?'

Abaddon looks up sharply.

'It's true,' says Erebus. 'He broke the Angel. That is a measure of his power. Likewise, he will soon break the False Emperor. Ezekyle, it is necessary for your father so be so steeped. He is the instrument of Chaos, and you will most likely find that disquieting when next you greet him. There is no need for you to go that far. You are not the chosen of the gods. Your father will need, hereafter, a First Captain who can keep him grounded, who has one foot in the materia. But through me, you can avail yourself of the endowments you need. I will not let you slip, I swear.'

'We must defend the Court,' Abaddon says to Baraxa.

'Ezekyle, no…'

'We must,' says Abaddon. 'My life for Lupercal. Ulnok, signal Sycar. Tell him to disengage and fall back. Tell him to draw those Custodes bastards this way. Phaeto, get cutters. We're opening the hull. We're going down to meet them.'

He turns to Erebus.

'What must I do?' he asks.

'Trust me,' says Erebus. 'Accept my word and my guidance.'

‘Instruct me, so I understand.’

‘It cannot be understood. It is not a manual or a treatise of–’

‘I’m not playing games, Apostle!’ Abaddon snarls.

‘Neither am I, Ezekyle,’ Erebus replies. ‘I mean that literally. It defies understanding. Trust me. You’ve seen the power of my words, and I bear many of them. I will tell you what must be said.’

9:v

The Court

They come to a place where, out of banks of sickly mist, rise the ruins of the most ancient city they have yet found. Loken feels they have travelled not just further into the damaged geography of the Inevitable City, but deeper into the layers of its history too. If it is all the cities that have ever been, blended into one by the tidal action of the warp, then they are reaching the primeval heart of it, the parts that man didn't make.

Gone, for the most part, are the cobbled streets and peg-tiled roofs, the tumbledown, timber-beam houses and stone bridges that, though derelict, showed the hand-marks of human construction. Infrequent too are the intruding traces of the Palace, or his father's flagship, which had become commingled with this realm. There are odd scraps – sections of inlaid, golden wall panel, an auramite door, brief sections of Scylla-pattern decking – but they are few, and they seem less like things than the recollection of things kept in the warp's remembrance.

Here, now, rise gaunt ashlar columns and blocks of grey diorite, truncated pillars of grim stone, and black, skeletal flying buttresses that support nothing. All the structures are wrecked, and all are monumental. They rise from the slow, bile-green mist like ancient leviathan creatures turned to stone by a vindictive gorgon. Some are caked in acid-yellow lichen or lurid scarlet moss. They show no signs of human tool-work, or terrestrial manufacture, and the scale of the arches and doorways dwarfs even the gleaming golden figure that Loken and the others are following. The site looks like some citadel that has risen from an oceanic gulf after aeons of submerged slumber.

Or, perhaps, the fathomless dark waters that concealed it have somehow drained away and left it, steaming and exposed,

open to the air. Above, the brimstone clouds of the warp storm swirl in a thunderhead a thousand kilometres wide, laced with veins of pink lightning and vivid fuchsia flashes.

It comes as little surprise that the Neverborn breeds lurking in these ruins are similarly the biggest and most ancient yet.

They have fought many daemon-things since they parted company with the Perpetuals Persson and Grammaticus. They have hacked their path through night-haunting ghouls and horned goat-kin in cobbled lanes, and rent their way past tentacled horrors and bone-winged vultures on crumbling aqueducts and cracked stone causeways. Loken's armour, like Leetu's and the proconsul's, is badged with daemon ichor and Neverborn gore. But blood does not seem to adhere to the Emperor's gleaming plate.

Something stirs in the mist to oppose them. It is gargantuan and oil-black, the size of a Palace gateway. Its true shape is hard to discern, for it has little symmetry. Glossy wet pseudopods writhe like seaweed in a current, and thorned, insectile legs as thick as trees raise it out of the murk. Immense horns, as dry and cracked as those of an old cattle skull, curve from the dark cliff of its brow. It glistens wet, dripping, and it wears a cloak of blinking, sightless eyes like a skein of bubbles.

Loken, Leetu and even Caecaltus balk at the mass of it, but the golden figure ahead of them does not falter. Every step of the way, He has not broken stride. He has maintained His urgent pace, fighting on the move, killing His way onwards, refusing to be slowed down or delayed.

The Emperor, a lustrous golden shape made tiny by the behemoth ahead, increases His step. He starts to stride, then run, His warblade looping in His hand until the blade catches fire. Ashamed of their momentary hesitation, Loken, Caecaltus and Leetu rush to follow Him.

The Neverborn giant is completely silent. It utters no roar nor growl nor voice of any kind. The only sounds are the wet slap of its moving bulk, the thump of its tread, the crack and

cascade of the pillars and ashlar blocks that it brushes against and knocks down, and the constant spatter of liquid and loose eyes streaming off its flanks and splashing the ground.

The Emperor is moving like a sprinter, head down, His stride long and sure. He races at the beast with the accelerating focus of a savannah cat chasing down its prey. Tentacles, black and grease-sheened, lash and snake, whipping like the banderoles and ribbon-pennants of a black legion. He evades, still closing, striking them aside with a blade that burns and severs. Loken smells the reek of boiled blood and burned meat.

The Emperor leaps, no longer a sprinting feline, but the sure-footed antelope that bounds to escape it. He lands on a foundered basalt block that slants upwards like a ramp, rushes to its mossy lip, and hurls Himself into the air. His warblade rises, a burning brand clenched in both hands, and He brings it down as He descends.

There is a jolting crack, as though lightning has struck the ground nearby. Driven by the descending golden form, the blade connects with the great beast's formless face. Lambent blue psyk-fire erupts from the splitting wound, scoring the black flesh. The hulking thing shudders backwards, shivering from the impact. Blood, or some brown fluid that passes for blood, showers out in prodigious volume, a torrent that splashes and churns along the ancient pavement. The Emperor lands, feet firmly planted, His knees bent to absorb the impact, then springs upright again, still moving. He is under its neck and chin now, scything through the mane of tentacles and tendrils that sinuate to clasp and block Him.

Loken closes, running hard, to add his blade to the fight. Words are suddenly bright in his head.

By His will alone!

He turns. Caecaltus has slid to a halt, and called the warning. Leetu has heard it as well, and broken his charge.

Neverborn shapes are swarming through the ruins on either side of them, seeking to encircle the four warriors, and drive

them towards the great beast. Some are shaggy humanoids with cloven feet and short, sharp cervine horns jutting backwards from their long, equine skulls. They snort and whinny, eyes mad, and wield flint axes and ironwood clubs. Others are hairless, eyeless brutes the size of bull-ogryns, hunch-shouldered and dagger-toothed, their filthy hides painted with ritual designs. None of them are less than three metres tall.

They rush in from both sides and from behind, leaping from stone blocks or emerging from the shadows between broken columns. They utter a war cry as they come, a guttural ululation in some alien tongue that, though Loken can't understand it, feels like an expression of his father's name.

The three warriors meet the brute attack with a rage of their own. The proconsul's guardian spear whirls and slices, like an immaculate parade-ground display, pulling arcs of blood through the air like streamers. Leetu holds his ground with scrupulous technique, turning and thrusting the loaned blade *Mourn-It-All* with utter confidence now he has grown to know its balance and character.

Loken ploughs into the foe instead of waiting for them to come to him. Once more, the Emperor has shared His strength with the last loyal son of Horus, channelling a fire through Loken's soul that lights up Rubio's sword with such force no materia can stop it. It goes through hide and meat, through tusk and bone, through wood and iron. The Neverborn try to overcome him with sheer numbers, massing around him, clubbing and tearing and grappling. But flint blades shatter like ice against his carapace, and his fist breaks as many skulls as his blade opens throats. He is quickly hosed in gore that smokes like acid and sticks like treacle.

A great cry shakes the air, a profound bellow that shivers even the largest slabs of stone around them. The abhuman Neverborn still alive recoil and flee, shrieking, back into the shadows and the mist.

The great daemon-beast has made the first and only utterance of its life. A death cry, of despair, perhaps, or disbelief. When Loken turns to look, he sees the colossal black form rolled onto its side like a beached whale, two spider legs upraised and curled like broken masts, steam oozing from the deep lacerations that score its flanks and breast. The Emperor is astride it, drawing His warblade free from the fatal wound. He jumps down off its bulk and, without a backward look to His companions, resumes His onward stride.

They hurry to follow, passing close to the dead beast's massive carcass. Blood and tainted liquor is still pouring out of it like water from burst pipes or rain from busted gutters. The torrents fall with such force they raise a foetid fume of moisture and spray in which eerie rainbows shimmer. The trio wade through the lake of blood slowly expanding around the monstrous corpse.

Beyond, the ancient stone path threads through the silent, cyclopean ruins and fog-shrouded hollows. Unseen things call out in the darkness, the harsh shriek of loons, the screech of owls. From everywhere comes the burbled chorus of amphibians, lurking in pools and waterlogged stone cisterns, and in the marsh depressions where the mist is thickest.

The toad-song and frog-throat babble is a constant drone, and the longer Loken hears it, the more it resembles the modulated pulse-chatter of a thousand orskode units broadcasting at once. There is a sound behind it, like the sigh of the wind. It's whispering. It's the rustling dry-spit of firewood eaten by flames.

The path ascends, climbing the slope of a blasted heathland where the dead brown brush is punctuated by tumbled blocks and comminative obelisks. Pink lightning flares and flashes behind the brow of the rise.

Beside the path, the giant blocks of the ancient city stand like mourners, drab and grey, massive and intimidating. There are rows of ancient archways, bearded with weeds, and the stumps of towers that, when intact, must have risen higher than any

steeple of the Palace. Nearby, a scatter of square and oblong sarsens marks the site of something long demolished. Each block is perfectly angled and shaped, and the smallest must weigh a hundred tonnes. They cover the slope to the right side of the path for kilometres, like the giant building blocks of some child titan, abandoned after play.

To the left of the path runs a row of blackened flying buttresses, spiked and finialled to such grotesque degree, they look as though their maker intended to mimic coils of razor wire out of jet stone. Whatever structure they were designed to support has long since vanished, apart from a single, low wall of murky marble that runs for several hundred metres.

Loken's vox warbles, and partial data blinks incoherently across his visor. The Emperor is ahead of them, His pace unrelenting. Loken leaves the path, and steps up several tumbled blocks of stone until he is on the top of the marble wall. He starts to walk along its length, still following the others on the path below.

'Captain Loken?' Caecaltus calls.

'Some contact,' Loken replies. 'Stand by.'

The transmission, whatever it is, is choppy and corrupted. No signal is behaving properly in this infernal realm. Loken had hoped that a raised position might improve reception.

The data flicks and fidgets across his display, blotchy and incoherent. What little he can fix originates to the left of them, at a distance of several kilometres. He turns to look, from his raised vantage. The ruin-pocked heath stretches away into the glowering distance. The locator says 'west', but he knows that's meaningless. The compass has no cardinal points here, in a place where even time has no direction.

'Rejoin us, Captain Loken,' Caecaltus instructs from below. They are leaving him behind.

'One moment,' Loken replies. He jumps-up magnification, scanning the horizon, adding a tactical over-map that slackly, but not unexpectedly, zeros on all values.

Far away, ten kilometres at least, the scrubby brown heathland gives way to a flatter dustbowl of alkali and loess, more like the dry wasteland they left behind hours earlier. He can make out a jumble of ruins, the scrappy, derelict husk of the Inevitable City, stretching out interminably. There is a shape of some size. He realises that it's part of a Terran orbital plate, a massive segment of one of the sub-orbital arcologies that formed airborne continents before the Throneworld fell. It lies, crumpled and uneven like a discarded mattress, across part of the ruined city. Extreme magnification shows the distinct flash and spark of weapons fire.

He scans the data-channels again, subjecting them to the deepest signal analysis his armour can provide. He isolates partial snatches of orskode, and fragments of marker icons.

'Proconsul!' he calls.

'Captain?'

'I'm detecting forces engaged, ten kilometres west…' He pauses, realises the redundancy of the statement, and points instead. 'Ten kilometres that way. Full specifics are unclear, but I believe it is your captain-general, and his Anabasis company. I think they have engaged my old Legion head-on.'

On the path below, Caecaltus and Leetu stop and look up at him.

'Should we signal them?' Loken asks. 'Attempt a signal?'

He sees Caecaltus bow his head in silent consultation. The golden figure ahead of them has not stopped walking.

'No, captain,' Caecaltus decides.

'But surely–' Loken begins.

'If they could disengage and move to link up with us,' Leetu says to Caecaltus, 'surely, we could use the strength?'

'Or help them,' Loken adds, leaping down from the marble wall and landing on his feet beside them. 'Their situation seems… severe. I can't give accurate numbers, but the

Sixteenth is there, and Word Bearers too. I believe they are led by First Captain Abaddon.'

'Believe?' asks Caecaltus.

'A partial tag-marker,' says Loken.

'An old friend?' asks Leetu.

Loken glances at him. It seems so odd for someone not to know Abaddon by name or reputation.

'We will take no action, captain,' says Caecaltus, and turns to continue on his way.

'Proconsul!' Loken snaps.

'My King-of-Ages is aware,' says Caecaltus. 'He has determined that the captain-general and his companions are providing us with an effective diversion. They are keeping a significant portion of the first-found's garrison aboard this ship occupied.'

This ship… It is beyond Loken's ability to accept the idea that all of this, this wasteland, this endless city, this eternal psychoscape, is somehow still contained within the structure of the *Vengeful Spirit*.

'We continue,' says Caecaltus.

'The captain-general and his companions may die,' says Loken.

'Then they will have done so with dignity and valour, and they will have helped us to achieve a successful closure of this venture.'

Loken and Leetu glance at each other. The proconsul's voice is so cold, so analytical and flat in its affect. The Emperor's mind is set. They are not stopping for anything.

Loken and Erda's legionary fall in step behind the proconsul. The wind has picked up, biting across the heath and nodding the dry, russet brush and spina. Lightning, shocking pink and neon-bright, tears the pyrocumulus cloud cover.

Beyond the crest of the hill, an army waits for them.

The Word Bearers are drawn up in company strength. A hundred men, with some Cataphractii, and several Leviathan Siege Dreadnoughts that tower over the Astartes, broad and heavy.

Behind them rises a pile of giant granite blocks, stacked and wedged haphazardly so as to form a crude, stepped pyramid, an artificial mountain. From its darkness, the buzz and sputter of whispers fills the air. The mountain has a yawning mouth, a jagged gateway of stupendous height that the Word Bearers have drawn up to guard.

The Emperor and His three companions come to a halt at the top of the hill. The overgrown path they were following snakes down through the parched brush of the heathland and winds like a thread all the way to the mountain's maw.

The traitor company straddles that path in wide formation. They stand, motionless but for the sway of their banners in the heathland wind.

Loken surveys their unmoving ranks: the glowering visors, the deep-set darkness of their eye slits in which yellow dots glint, the feathered broom-crests and plumes of officers, the studded pauldrons and weathered plate, the grilled snouts and cage-masks, the breeze-tugged tabards, the implacable set of iron-heavy boots and sabatons, the heinous script etched on ceramite or inked on fluttering parchments wax-sealed to armour-joints. Their poses are utterly defiant yet casual, hammers leant across shoulders, longswords and chainblades resting tip down, mauls carried cross-wise at hip height in both hands, greatswords set upright at sides like spears. They seem like brigands, like vagabond thugs, awaiting their prey with cool and leisurely confidence.

Loken clears his throat, and adjusts his grip on Rubio's blade.

At his side, Leetu says, 'We can take them.'

The remark is so off-hand, so flippant, it takes Loken by surprise and he laughs, with genuine amusement, for the first

time in years.

‘We can,’ says Caecaltus, but his voice is not his own.

The Emperor takes a single step forward. With an instant ripple of motion and clatter of arms, the traitors shift, raising weapons into proffers, lowering pikes and pole-arms to address. There is a loud and pneumatic thump-whine, like the amplified spit of a nail gun, as the Siege Dreadnoughts’ weapon pods open fire. Dazzling bolts of tank-killing las streak up the slope.

And vanish.

The blazing bolts collapse and dissipate into clouds of flame five metres short of their target. Loken feels the ache of elevated psionics. He can almost see the invisible ripple of the mind-shield the Emperor has raised as it is struck by the immense firepower. He hears the slap and hiss of las-fire hitting nothing, and being nullified, all kinetic force scattered, all thermal energy radiated away.

Then the ache increases so sharply, Loken feels it in the sinus cavities of his head. His ears throb.

The Emperor takes another step. He is raising His power claw, His warblade held low at His side in the other hand. Dazzling voltaics, that startlingly pure *hsbd-iryt* blue, accumulate in His palm, and coil between His finger-claws, jumping like plasma strings. He lets the gathered lightning go.

It arcs from His raised hand, faults the sky above the blasted heath, and strikes the ground just short of the traitor mass. There is a flare of black-body radiation, a thunderclap of violent gas-pressure change, an ionised bang of electrical discharge as gigajoules of energy are released.

The struck ground burns. The struck ground breaks. The shockwave widens, propagating plasmic fire that rolls into the Word Bearers’ lines, annihilating the ground into churning ash, and obliterating the ranks of warriors standing upon it. They disintegrate one by one, shredded by heat and fire, hurled into the air, fused armour plates and scorched weapons spinning

out of the destruction as debris that scatters, smouldering, in a wide swathe across the landscape. Nothing organic survives. The rolling wave of shock-fire sweeps through the entire cohort, unstoppable, consuming everything, burning men whole like twig-effigies, melting ceramite, igniting banners that burn wildly as they slump and fall. Cataphractii melt like wax. The Siege Dreadnoughts, stubborn and defiant with their great, armoured bulks, burn with blue fire like drop pods on re-entry and then burst, one by one, in titanic explosions as their payloads cook off.

When the glare fades and the ache subsides, there is nothing left apart from an acre or two of churned and blackened ground. Fragments of plate and heat-darkened armour segments litter the burn area, and the heathland wind drives the hot smoke sideways in a long, white plume.

The Emperor resumes His advance, following the path down the slope. His three companions follow. The brush on either side of them is burning in many places where superheated, out-thrown debris has ignited the dry spina and scrub, like some moorland clearance, the brown undergrowth squirming with the gold-and-amber worms of slow-burning roots.

The quartet approaches the mouth of the mountain, and passes under its shadow.

Inside, the darkness is palpable, enclosing them like heavy felt. After a few steps, the Emperor increases His radiance to drive it back, His ornate armour glowing with an inner light that suffuses the blackness.

By that light, as they advance, they see the gloomy, mausoleum majesty of the inner chambers. It is like a tomb, but one long robbed-out. The echoes of their footsteps circle back to them from the high and shadowed ceilings.

Beyond a third great arch, the tomb dwindles, or rather, mingles. The psychotecture becomes something else. The bare stone walls of flaked marble and granite, upon which can be seen the blurred figurings of long-lost inscriptions and reliefs, begin to merge with plates of metal and corroded stanchions.

Loken knows it at once. The *Vengeful Spirit*, which they have been inside all along, is slowly making itself visible again. Cables hang and drape in slack loops from the ruptured ceiling, the severed ends hissing and spitting weak sparks of power. The deck plates and underfloor gravitic grids are crumpled, torn loose, rivets snapped and scattered. Loken feels the irregular and uneven pools of artificial gravity they generate, patches where he almost floats, and patches where he feels anchored like an anvil. He sees tortured bulkheads, slabs of adamantine and plasteel ruptured and mutilated by the caress of Chaotic power.

They smell smoke, the stale odour of a fire extinguished, and the rank stench of death. This is a charnel house, an ossuary, a place of extinction and grave mould. Sacrifice has been made here, and recently, some thrice-damned rite, a savage offering at the altar of a butcher-god.

Something has died. Something else has lived on, in a way that it should not have. The air is full of whispers, a rasping hymn of emptiness. Everywhere, the stench of terror.

They advance. The Emperor's steady stride has not faltered or diminished. He carries His light deeper into the darkness.

They come to the skulls.

Just a few at first, human skulls, scorched and fractured, jaws missing. They litter the broken deck like scree on a mountain path. They become more numerous, and start to heap and pile like rubble. A carpet of skulls that crack and dry-splinter under their feet, a slope of skulls that scatter and tumble as they begin to ascend.

A mound of skulls.

The Emperor leads the way, without effort. Loken, Caecaltus and Leetu follow, clawing their path up the loose, unstable mass. They see a light above, a crepuscular glow.

The skulls, heaped up in such quantity Loken cannot bear to estimate a number, form a long, steep ramp that leads to the

shorn-away end of the next deck level. Lumen units in wire cages cast a harsh, blue glare.

The lights are ultraviolet. Loken can detect a shrill hum at the outside edge of his hearing. This is emergency lighting, decontamination protocols. The flagship, riddled with infection, is vainly trying to negate its corruption.

They step from the skull-slope onto the deck plates. The walls respire softly. It is sunset-red in the hallway, like being outdoors in the barren seabeds of Mars, or the lava fields of Medusa. Light, almost blood red, strobes slightly, flickering through leaves swayed by the wind. Or something like leaves. Loken ignores such trickery. He can hear whispering again, like dead leaves skittering in the breeze or shushing under foot. Like the dry wing-cases of beetles. Like whirring moths–

What is it they are whispering? He can almost make out the words.

The name.

One name, uttered and repeated.

Father.

Ahead, the severed corridor ends in a doorway. Its frame is made of carved human bone. They step through it, and find themselves in a narrow tunnel. It is barely wide enough for them to move along it, the black walls sheer on either hand. Loken looks up, and sees that the walls soar high above him. It's not a tunnel. It's a tight ravine, a fissured seam split between towering cliffs. They advance.

The ground is damp, dark rock, so smooth it seems to have been worn by millennia of footsteps, all making the same, dread pilgrimage they are undertaking. After thirty metres, the crevasse starts to taper. The walls become closer, constricting them. Loken thinks he can see a vertical bar of pale light far ahead. They are forced to turn sideways and edge their way along to fit.

It is claustrophobic, despite the endless space above. The cliff walls compress, and scrape against their armour. Loken can

see that the cliffs are made of human bones, braided together like sheaves. They are dripping wet, oily with black ooze.

Another few sideways steps, and Loken begins to wonder if the crevasse will taper so much they will be unable to continue. It begins to feel as though the walls will wedge them tight, or clench together and crush them.

The Emperor, by far the largest of the four of them, leads the way. He is impatient, and has no time for the obstacles the psychotecture throws at Him, or for any ritual meaning or symbolic significance in the procession of stages they are being made to follow to gain access to the shrine. For a shrine it most surely is. A shrine, a lair, a god-nest. He has no intention of observing the decreed rites of entry and submission.

He halts, and passes His warblade to Caecaltus. The massive sword is a burden even for the mighty Companion. The Emperor places His hands flat on the walls of the narrow defile.

He presses.

Nothing happens at first. Then Loken hears a grinding rumble. Scraps of rock, pebbles and dust patter down from high above. The cliff walls slowly part, scraping aside, forced by inhuman strength as the Emperor slowly flexes and straightens His arms.

Now the gap is wide enough. The Emperor lowers His hands, reclaims His blade, and walks on.

They step into the open. The Lupercal Court.

Loken knows what it is, though he has never seen the place before. He stares at the vast space, the fluted columns, the arches springing from their imposts to support the towering ribcage of the ceiling. The floor, of mirror-polished stone, reflects none of them except the golden shimmer of the Emperor. The scale is vast and damning, a belittling, artificial infinite. Loken gazes at the horror of it, the oppressive space, the constricting immensity. It is a necrotic cathedral of graven

ebony and gothic black marble. It is a carrion temple of oblivion, lit by a rancid glow of bloodlight.

Loken hears Leetu gasp.

He turns, and sees the Angel.

The Bright Lord of Baal, head bowed and turned to the left, is crucified against the far wall. He hangs like an icon or relic, a sacred sigil to be worshipped and knelt before. His arms and wings are outstretched, his golden wargear dented and torn. Too many – far too many – black spikes have been driven through his body and limbs. The black wall beneath his arms and feet is washed red with the blood that has run down to pool beneath him in the litter of white feathers.

'No,' murmurs Loken. 'No.'

'My king–!' Caecaltus says, showing the first emotion – true compassion – that Loken has ever known him express. The proconsul is genuinely shocked. He knows too well that Sanguinius prophesied his own death and, despite his father's efforts, went to meet it. He is braced to bear his master's grief.

None comes. The Emperor ignores His Companion. He steps towards the body on the wall. When He rejected the promise of godhood, He excised a great deal of His emotional core too. He numbed His feelings so that crimes like this could not be turned into weapons against Him.

+Take him down.+

Loken and Caecaltus hurry forward, and try to pluck out the black iron nails.

Leetu looks at the Emperor.

'Is he here?' he asks, apparently unafraid of the Master of Mankind, but terrified of what the answer might be.

+Yes, LE 2.+

Horus smiles.

The cathedral shifts.

Loken and Caecaltus turn. They have dragged the last nail out of the cold stone and colder flesh, and are trying to lower the Angel's limp and heavy body to the ground as gently as they can. His blood has smeared them both. They hear the smile. Not the grind and scrape of stone; not the rumble of fractal architecture as it folds and realigns, resetting the obsidian columns and the black, gothic arches; not the creak and squeal of the endlessly ramifying psychotecture as it counter-rotates like a kaleidoscope to make a bigger and yet more distressing tabernacle of ruin.

They hear *the smile*.

They hear the smile of the thing that emerges from the intersection between re-forming columns, a daemonic abomination in humanoid form, sheathed in infernal plate and bathed in bloodlight, a god-monster that steps into the Court out of an unfolding flower of black bone.

'Father,' says the smile.

9:vi

Tied

‘How far back do we have to go?’ John asks, watching Oll crouch down to tie another loop of thread. The dead, grey street, which reminds Grammaticus of the back lane of some plague-emptied medieval berg, is dismally quiet, except for the gust and rumble of the warp storm haunting the horizon.

‘All the way,’ Oll replies. ‘The whole route has to be marked. So, as far as we can get, I guess. I don’t know… Calth?’

‘*That* far?’ John gasps in dismay.

Oll grins at him.

‘No, *idiot*,’ he says. ‘Just as far as the point where we started to leave the threads.’

John looks relieved.

‘So, the Palace?’

Oll nods and rises. They start walking again, following the winding cobbled street. Oll’s lasrifle is slung over his shoulder, but John has his carbine across his chest, ready. The immaterial breeze stirs the weeds growing between the cobblestones, and flutters dead leaves from gutters.

‘The last thread I remember us leaving was just before the Custodes captured us,’ says Oll. ‘So, *that* far at least. We have to make sure the path meets, or overlaps. It has to be there for us.’

Oll pauses.

‘It has to still *have been* there for us…’ he tries. He shakes his head. ‘You’re better at the tenses than I am.’

‘Not *that* good,’ John says.

They walk a little further, and cross a grubby, timber-beamed yard.

‘How do we know we’re making the same route?’ he asks.

‘I don’t think we do, not exactly,’ Oll replies, ‘and I don’t think it matters. As long as there’s a clear course that takes us – *took* us – from the Palace to the place we met – *will* meet – the Emperor…’ He frowns in frustrated amusement. ‘I’m saying, as long as there’s a path, it’ll find us. I mean, it *did* find us.’

He smiles at John again. They’re both trying hard to treat the task as the crucial thing it is, and not the ludicrous errand it appears to be. They know it matters, and that if it’s not done, everything will fall apart. But it seems so trivial and mindless when they know that somewhere, something far more important must be taking place. They’re trying very hard not to think about that.

‘What if we run out of yarn?’ John asks.

Oll shrugs. The clew of thread is getting smaller, but it never seems to run out, no matter how many pieces he breaks off with his teeth. They exit the yard through a dim passageway, and emerge onto another street. Oll waits obligingly as John scopes for danger, carbine raised. When he’s sure the street is empty, he beckons Oll out. He’s taking his promise seriously, even though he made it to himself. He’s going to keep Oll safe. It makes him part of this, not a hanger-on. It helps make their mission seem significant.

In the street, timber-gabled dwellings overhang melancholy flagstone pavements. Oll stops to tie another thread to a gutter pipe.

‘Does it matter that it’s us leaving them?’ John asks.

‘So many questions, Grammaticus!’ Oll laughs, shaking his head.

‘No, I mean, Hebet tied them. Even the ones he didn’t tie. He said he recognised his own knots. But these won’t be his.’

‘They were mine anyway,’ says Oll.

‘What?’

Oll has cut off another length of twine. He shows John how he is tying it around the pipe, and the knot he’s making. He thinks of the sun flashing on waters dark as wine, the Pleiades rising to announce the start of sailing season, the fast boats with the bright eyes painted on their bows to stare down daemons and see the way ahead.

‘The wolf noose,’ he says. ‘It’s as old as me. We used to use it as a rope hitch at sea. I taught it to Hebet. Him and me used to tie up sheaves of swartgrass with it on the farm. The knots looked like his because they looked like mine.’

He points to the loop around the pipe.

‘There,’ he says. ‘Who tied that? Can you tell? Do you think Hebet would know?’

‘So they could have been yours all along?’

‘They probably will be,’ says Oll.

John snorts, and sighs. ‘I can’t believe we’re doing this, Oll. I can’t believe this is how our part ends. Some mundane chore.’

‘*Important* chore.’

‘Yeah, but still…’

‘You’re such a romantic, John. A story isn’t a story to you unless it has a sweeping or epic ending, eh? A dramatic climax? Some last heroic deed? Life’s not like that, and neither are myths. They’re not all neatly plotted out in a satisfying sequence. They happen in the order they happen. You remember the parts in the Eleniki myths when they careen their ships so the chandlers can scrape the hulls? And they patch in new deck planks, and sew replacement sails?’

‘No.’

‘Exactly. But they are parts of the stories. The stories couldn’t have happened without them.’

John shrugs in resignation.

‘All right,’ he says. ‘So, you’re saying, it’s boring being a legend?’

‘Oh, you’re a *legend* now? You wish,’ says Oll. ‘I’m saying not all legends have a big finish.’

‘This one does,’ says John ruefully. ‘It’s just happening somewhere else.’

‘Try not to think about it,’ Oll starts to say. But John has grabbed him, his hand over Oll’s mouth, and pulled him into the shadows of the wall.

A squad of Traitor Excertus, Merudin 20th Tactical by the look of them, trudge down the old street. They are filthy and tired, wary and jumpy. The pair hide until the troopers have disappeared from view.

‘Thanks,’ Oll whispers.

‘I’m here to look out for you, remember? Keep you safe?’ John checks his short-pattern rifle, and folds out the wire stock. ‘We don’t want to fight if we don’t have to. But we’re not alone out here.’

Oll nods. ‘The sooner we find a way back into the Sanctum, the better,’ he says. ‘You spot a door or anything, we take it.’

‘It won’t be any safer in there,’ says John.

‘No,’ Oll agrees, ‘but think about this. If the Emperor… *wins*, then Horus will be dead, or subdued. If that happens, the warp will probably loosen its grip. Chaos will be in retreat. And all of this, this city, this realm, will realign. The materia of realspace will stabilise again.’

‘I hope so,’ says John, with a shiver.

‘So do I. So if we’re not in the Palace when that happens–’

‘We’ll be stuck out here?’

‘No. Well, *yes*, but worse. We’ll still have to leave the trail, because it’s essential, but all the steps along the way won’t be

stuck together any more. They'll all be stretched out again across time, and space, back where they came from… The Sanctum, the damn ship, this city, and every other bit of every city we've been through. Leaving the trail then will be much harder. We'd have to use the old Immaterium Sidestep again.'

'Shit,' says John. 'That could take years.'

'Years,' says Oll. 'Centuries. The rest of our lives.'

Grammaticus exhales hard. He doesn't like the sound of that. Doing it one way was a long, gruelling odyssey. Doing it again *backwards*…

'All right,' he says. 'Let's pick up the pace. Let's find an entrance to the Sanctum as fast as we can. Dammit, I wish we could navigate out here. Get a bearing on the Palace. A true read…'

'Forget it. My compass is useless. The warp storm screws with it. Your torquetum too. They don't work here.'

'It's broken anyway,' says John. 'When we fought that bastard Erebus, I think I fell on it.'

He pulls the little device out of his pocket to prove the point.

The wraithbone torquetum is intact.

'It was definitely broken,' says John. 'Definitely.'

'But He repaired us,' Oll replies softly. 'Everything. These old guns, our clothes. Us. He mended everything when…'

He trails off. They stare at each other.

'No,' whispers John.

Oll doesn't dare look. He puts his hand into the deep pocket of his military jacket. He pulls out the splinters of the old knife.

Except he doesn't.

Across the palm of his hand, the stone knife is unbroken.

'He made everything whole again,' murmurs John, gazing at it in wonder.

‘More than whole,’ says Oll. ‘New.’

He can feel the tingle of the lapped blade, the life in it restored. It isn’t the tired, ugly throb of old murders that it used to be. It’s the lithe and urgent hunger of an apex predator.

‘He needs this,’ Oll says. ‘He needs every advantage He can get because, Throne knows, the odds are against Him. I hate to tell you this, John, but we’ve got to go back again.’

9:vii

Sanguinary

Oh, how is it to die? How is it to die at the hands of one of your own kind, a warrior of the Legiones Astartes? Before the Civil War, it was not something Rann had ever considered. He was aware of the concept of transhuman dread, but had given little thought to the experience of those who found themselves facing his kind, the problematic xenos breeds and estranged cultures who chose to resist compliance.

Then Horus' infamy began, and the notion became something that required to be contemplated, not just as a dread imagining, but as a tactical rehearsal. How does an Astartes combat the lethality of an Astartesian brother? He had visualised, as preparatory evolutions, the berserker assault of the World Eaters, the surgical annihilation of the Iron Warriors, the volatile zeal of the Word Bearers, the elite discipline of the Sons of Horus, the cut-throat cunning of the Alpha Legion, the terror-shock of the Night Lords…

He has visualised a hundred deaths. Not this. Never this. Not the Blood Angels.

Not Azkaellon. Not the Sanguinary Lord. He cannot–

He cannot bring himself to kill Azkaellon.

They crash together. They tumble in the mire, drowning and flailing. The impact of Azkaellon's pounce has broken Rann's cuirass and cracked his ossmodula-fused ribcage.

Not Azkaellon.

Azkaellon seems to possess – and be possessed by – the strength of a dozen Astartes. He shakes Rann like a wolfhound savaging its prey.

Not Azkaellon. He cannot–

Rann has nothing but love and respect for his brothers in the other loyal Legions. In the course of the siege, he has formed bonds of unbreakable kinship. War's one great gift is to reveal true friends.

But there are some that even the Lord Seneschal, captain of the First Assault Cadre, holds in such esteem that he cannot think of them as friends or peers. They seem to him, for all his own deeds, like warriors of a different order altogether. Sigismund is one, aloof and uncompromising. Atok Abidemi of the Salamanders is another, implacable and dignified. The mighty Raldoron.

And perhaps more than any, Azkaellon.

Not Azkaellon. Not Azkaellon. He–

Though the captain of the Sanguinary Guard has shown Rann nothing but courtesy and kindness, he remains a golden demigod of such beauty and majesty that he seems unknowable. Such is Azkaellon's fame, prowess and grace, Rann has always felt humbled in his presence. Rann had been flattered that Azkaellon seemed to treat Rann with respect, but he never expected to be counted as a friend.

Not by Azkaellon. Not by *this* Azkaellon.

The grace is gone. The regal beauty, beside which Rann has always felt ordinary and dull, remains, but it has tipped over into something unbearable, something too beautiful to behold. Azkaellon is the cruel face of Mortality unmasked.

He is the face that the Blood Angels only show to their enemies.

Liquid mud sprays up as they churn and grapple. Rann cannot fight him. He cannot kill him. Rann tries to fend him away with his axe-hafts, sparing the lethal blades. He–

But he cannot kill him. Within seconds, Rann realises that it is not a matter of reserve, or mercy, or of him pulling his blows and sparing his blades.

He could not kill Azkaellon if he *wanted* to.

What beast has consumed his soul? What wild rage? What atrocious madness? The Sanguinary's beautiful eyes are black, his teeth are beautiful fangs, his fury a beautiful–

Rann goes down, struck hard. He wallows in the mud. Gasping, spitting, he manages to block a lunging blow that would have torn off his jaw, but he cannot stop Azkaellon's thrusting bite. The Sanguinary gnaws at his throat. Rann clubs with *Headsman*'s haft, and Azkaellon lurches away with a torn chunk of Rann's gorget speared between his canines.

It is the work of daemons, no doubt. A final insult, a final profanity, to seize those who have stood firm for seven long years and, in the final hour of their lives, rob them of their last remaining dignity. Their deaths were assured the moment the traitor wave broke around Hasgard Fort. But that's not enough for Horus Lupercal. Nothing is ever enough for him. He is not content with taking their lives. He wants their defiance too. He wants them to slaughter each other, in a maddened disgrace, so that their glory, courage, brotherhood and honour are defiled before they perish.

He wants everyone to die a traitor.

Rann won't do it. If he fights back, then he is doing the Warmaster's work, and breaking the bond he has given his life to defend. And if he does not–

The Sanguinary Guard's fist catches him hard, and he is thrown backwards. He slams into the side of a burned-out Rhino, and slides off it into the ooze. Blood drools from his lips. He tries to rise. An axe misses his face by inches and thuds into the Rhino's hull. There's a Word Bearer right on top of him, screaming at him. The focus of the Sanguinary's attack has been so intense, Rann has almost forgotten that they are just two men in the very thick of a wild and grinding battle, with Astartes all around them, fighting and killing.

Rann knocks the raving Word Bearer backwards with the butt of an axe. The Word Bearer tries to come at him again, but he is immediately engaged by a White Scar. As the pair clash, Rann claws himself upright, in time to fend off two World

Eaters who come plunging out of the billowing smoke. A third World Eater wheels past behind them, trading blows with an Imperial Fist. Rann thinks it's Devarlin, the young initiate. It's impossible to be sure, just a suffocating frenzy of milling, thrashing figures. Visibility in the spiralling smoke is virtually zero. Rann is drenched in noise. He sees the Imperial Fist fall, struck through the neck. He sees one of the Sons of Horus, just three or four metres to his left, hacking another Imperial Fist apart, despite the iron lance wedged entirely through his torso. He glimpses, for a second, some Neverborn horror trailing the head and ribcage of a White Scar from its paw. The slaughter is absolute. There are traitors everywhere, their blades wet from butchery, and the few loyal brothers he can see are dead or cornered.

He is one of them. The two World Eaters have him backed against the Rhino's wreck. He tries to parry their whirring blades, blocking their raw fury and feral strength with his superior axe-craft. He finds a throat, and slashes it with a punch of *Headsman*'s beard. The World Eater falls sidelong, clutching at his fatal wound as though he doesn't comprehend it. The other strikes Rann across the shoulder, spilling him into the muck. The traitor raises his blade.

And is jerked backwards violently. A White Scar has seized him from behind. It's Kyzo, Namahi's tenacious outrider. White Scar and World Eater grapple, plate grinding against plate. Rann surges to his battle-brother's aid. Then all three of them are knocked down. The raging Sanguinary has found them again.

Azkaellon lifts Rann by the throat. Kyzo utters some incoherent cry of dismay. Like Rann, he is utterly confounded by the Blood Angel lord's berserk onslaught. He tries to tear Rann free. In another moment, the World Eater is wrestling with Azkaellon too.

So here is the unfathomable madness of this heresy. A White Scar, a World Eater, an Imperial Fist and a Blood Angel locked in a mindlessly brutal fight, trying to save or kill each other in some parody of logic or reason.

Rann tears himself free, staggering backwards. The Sanguinary smashes Kyzo aside, breaking his visor. The World Eater tries to rip off Azkaellon's face. Azkaellon bites off his fingers.

The World Eater recoils, blood blurting from his ruined hand. The Sanguinary shreds the traitor's face and tears off his left arm. Azkaellon lets the corpse fall, turning on the White Scar Kyzo, who is trying to rise. His kill is denied by a chainaxe that slays Kyzo while he is still on his knees. Two more of Angron's bastards have entered the melee. One charges Azkaellon while the other frees his revving chainaxe from the White Scar's cadaver. A warrior of the Death Guard ploughs in from another angle. Azkaellon lunges at the World Eaters without hesitation. By the time he collides with them, the Death Guard is clinging to his back and clawing at his wings. The four huge figures wrestle in the mire, so coated with mud it is hard to see where one ends and another begins.

The Sanguinary's bloodlust is directed at anybody, Rann realises. Friend or foe, anything living in range, anything moving within his tunnelled field of vision. And he carries no weapons. Where his sword and shield have gone, Rann has no idea. It is as though Azkaellon has abandoned them, regarding them as inferior to his teeth and claws.

Where did those teeth come from?

Rann struggles upright. He grips his mud-slick axes and tries to wade forward. He sees Azkaellon drag the Death Guard off his shoulder, and swing the traitor bodily into one of the World Eaters. The World Eater's neck snaps, but the sound of that gunshot crack is lost in the howl of his chainaxe which, caught between the clashing bodies, is noisily disembowelling the Death Guard legionary. They fall together as one shuddering form.

The other son of Angron swings his axe sidelong with full force. Azkaellon doesn't bother to duck or block, or even try to evade. He takes the blow square on the left pauldron, which

splinters. The blade digs into the meat of Azkaellon's shoulder beneath, discharging a spray of blood.

But now the World Eater's guard is open. In another second, so is his throat. The Sanguinary's teeth gouge away so much of the traitor's neck and upper chest that his head is left barely attached.

Azkaellon drinks, his face smeared red like a carnodon at a kill.

Rann turns away and starts to move. If he can put some distance between himself and the Sanguinary, the impossible choice of a fight might be avoided.

But there is nowhere to move in a pitched battle of this density. Just beyond the cremated hull of the Rhino, Rann blunders into three Sons of Horus, who are wading out of the boiling smoke and drifting sparks. Knee-deep in the liquid churn, Rann swings *Hunter* into one, reeling him aside, and uses *Headsman*'s haft to catch the sword of the second. The third is trying to stick him with a short pig-spear. Rann strikes with both axes, severing the third traitor's arm and spear with *Hunter*, and crushing his helm-beak with *Headsman*. The Son of Horus spins and topples into the mud, lifting a spray of it. Rann has time to turn and block the sword a second time, but the first traitor, his plate crumpled across the chest from *Hunter*'s impact, cracks him across the back with a maul.

Rann collapses, submerging in the mud briefly. It fills his mouth and nose. He is dragged out of it by the two traitors, who grip him tightly between them. The swordsman raises his blade to strike off Rann's head.

The blade continues to rise, and rise. The traitor is lifting clear of the ooze, his grip on Rann broken, filth and mud streaming off his legs. Azkaellon has grabbed him, his talons puncturing his side and hip.

The Sanguinary dashes the traitor aside. The Son of Horus hits the carcass of the Rhino, then slips off into the mud, but the jutting spar of a broken axle has gored him.

The remaining Cthonian clubs the Sanguinary with his maul. The force of the blow makes Azkaellon recoil. Forgetting Rann completely, the Son of Horus increases his assault, raining strokes with his maul, as though he is aware that if he lets up for a second, the Sanguinary will destroy him.

Rann finds his feet. He wants to put an axe into the traitor's back and end the merciless attack, but he knows that if he does, he will become the focus of Azkaellon's bloodlust once more.

Rann does it anyway. The fire of his honour has not gone out. A man defends a comrade, no matter what that comrade has become.

Headsman splits the traitor's spine.

Rann levers the blade out, letting his kill fall. He sees the Sanguinary fix him with his dead gaze again. The Sanguinary is awash with blood, wheezing and snorting, aspirating gore. The wings flex to spear him onto his prey.

Someone grabs Rann and wrenches him out of the path of the Sanguinary's lunging attack. Azkaellon sprawls, hampered by the mire, splashing and floundering. Rann's saviour drags him behind the Rhino's shell. In a second, Rann can hear the growl and smash of the Sanguinary already tearing into other victims. Traitors or loyal sons, he has no idea.

Rann looks up. He sees Zephon Sorrow-Bringer. Zephon has dragged him clear.

He opens his mouth to speak. Zephon shakes his head fiercely. He is plastered in mud and gore. He seizes Rann by the forearm, and they stumble away from the wrecked vehicle into the smoke.

The ground is littered with the dead of both sides, wrapped together and half-submerged in the ooze. Twenty metres on, they come to the out-flank wall of the fort, a nub of broken rockcrete jutting from the morass like a rotten tooth from a diseased gum. The dead are plentiful here too, piled up either side of the wall's remains, choking its archways and breach-

points. There is no longer any sense of what was inside the wall or without, no evidence of which side of it was being defended and which attacked.

Rann slumps against the wall. He is numb, and injured more severely than he's ever been. The din of mass conflict rolls around them. A moment's respite, that's all this is. They will have to throw themselves back into the battle. There is nowhere to go, and this is the fate they both chose.

The roar of battle is a demented percussion. A stale wind moans around the broken piece of fortress that shelters them, its breath filled with black smoke. There is no sky, no distance, just a glaring red haze.

'Some madness took him,' Rann whispers.

'Took us all,' Zephon replies. His voice is fragile, like ice.

'All?'

Zephon tries to wipe mud and blood from his mouth. It is smeared too thickly.

'I think my lord is dead,' he says. 'My father. I felt it. We all…'

'Zephon–'

'We felt the pain, Rann, and in that pain, a rage fell upon us all. Mindless and–'

'You are not mindless,' says Rann.

Zephon sighs.

'I have been in pain too long,' he replies. 'I have known death or its likeness. The reconstruction of my body…'

His voice trails off. Rann can see the Blood Angel is struggling with a deep anguish.

'Perhaps it has blunted me,' says Zephon. 'Dulled me. Perhaps I cannot feel the pain as sharply as my brothers. Perhaps… I have already been feeling it for far too long. A

rage has taken the Blood Angels, Rann. It has taken their wits and their souls and their dignity.'

He looks at Rann. His fangs are bright and sharp.

'All of them,' he says.

9:viii

Cadaver Lord

Keeler watches Sigismund instruct his officers. His orders seem simple, and delivered with confidence, as though he is expecting to bring off an easy and decisive victory.

Keeler's no student of strategy, but she realises it's not that. Sigismund's not planning how to win. He's planning how best to die.

It's hard to estimate the Death Guard numbers through the heat haze, but it seems to be several companies at least. The traitor force forms a black stain on the hard copper plain ahead, as though the rugged line of mesas and sandy bluffs behind them have leaked oil onto the desert floor. Oil or blood. Both look black in the amber light. Keeler can see banners and standards raised in the heat shimmer, the glint of light flashing off blades. Elements of the enemy force are already stirring and moving forward to meet the pilgrimage across the hard-baked ground. There is a noxious stench in the air.

She realises Sigismund is committed, and is obliged to make a fight of it. Even if she and the conclave could divert the immense column of humanity they are leading – and they cannot – there is no time for it to move, and nowhere for it to go to escape the traitor assault. Sigismund isn't going to waste precious moments attempting to engineer some futile retreat. He's going to meet the traitors head-on.

And that means he's going to die. They're all going to die. Sigismund's instructions – quickly spoken and just as quickly accepted by his Seconds – contain no prospect of victory. They simply outline how to inflict as much damage to the enemy mass as possible before the inevitable overrun.

On the Via Aquila, there is no going back. There is only going forward, to whatever fate awaits. Out here in the amber

waste, there is no trace of the Via Aquila, and there hasn't been for a long time, but Keeler feels they are still on it, still flowing along it like a river along its channel. It will take them where it takes them.

Her mind remains bruised from the Emperor's cry. It has left her feeling weak, her extremities numb. She wonders if Sigismund feels the same. He shows no sign of it. He seems unchanged, intent but quiet, not unduly bothered by the prospect of death. The approaching battle seems to be merely the next observance due, as determined by his order's book of hours, a duty as solemn yet unremarkable as plainsong or meditation.

The first cohort of Seconds starts away from the head of the pilgrimage, a fast-moving group of light armour with infantry jogging at its heels. The second, slightly smaller, sets out a moment later, moving in parallel to the first, and then turning wider in a run towards the right flank of the enemy formation. The cohorts wash dust back over the head of the pilgrimage host. This is no place for a fight, she thinks. An open, arid plain without feature or relief, roasting in the ugly heat. Dust films the air like gauze. There is a breathlessness that seems to crush their lungs. Every metal surface catches the hot light like a mirror.

She jumps down from the fighting vehicle as it starts up. Every tread will be needed, nothing left in reserve. As it lurches forward to join the third cohort, she leads Zhi-Meng back towards the halted pilgrims, winding her scarf around her mouth and nose to block the dust. The river of humanity stretches out in front of her, trailing away across the desert flats as far as she can see. The faces of those closest seem unafraid. Their expressions are blank. They have seen too much already and their capacity for fear has been sucked out of them. They simply stand and gaze at the battle unfolding.

She looks back, and sees Sigismund. He seems to feel her eyes on him, and he turns to cast one brief look in her direction. A nod. What is that? Respect? Goodbye?

Then he's starting forward at the head of the fourth cohort, which is principally Templar Astartes, and lacks any armour component. All four cohorts have raised Sigismund's banner. The Champion wants the enemy to know who's coming. The cohorts become four prongs scraping trails of dust towards the enemy, which is gathering momentum to meet them like an encroaching sandstorm.

Keeler realises, belatedly, that the battle has already begun. Sigismund, it seems, is not one for dramatic flourish, or for holding fire until some sudden commencement. The veteran marksmen riding on the hulls of the first and second cohort vehicles are already picking shots at the enemy lines, methodically killing and maiming with their powerful long-range weapons. Turret weapons have also begun a harassing barrage, loosing shells on the run. Each shot spits out a horsetail plume of white smoke that drifts behind the speeding vehicle, followed like an afterthought by the crump of firing. Keeler sees slow geysers of dust and fried earth start to lift among the enemy lines, a few dozen at a time, fresh ones raising their murky spouts even as previous ones fade to haze. She's too far away to hear the detonations or see the extent of the damage, but she can see the grouping. The firing is not widespread and general, it is targeting specific sections of the line. By the time the cohorts meet the traitors, the traitor formation will be cracked and holed in several deliberate places.

There's nothing she can do. She sits on the cracked earth and, for want of anything better, starts to recite a passage from the Lectitio to herself.

'What are you doing, Keeler?' Lord Zhi-Meng asks.

'I don't know,' she replies. She reaches up her hand to take his. 'But do it with me.'

The Seconds and the traitors meet. The Death Guard, dark and bloated spectres in the welter of dust, do not charge to meet the Templar force in any disciplined formation. To Sigismund, the enemy mass seems to ooze forward, swelling, puffing

outward like some ballooning fungus, or a fast-spreading mould. The wasteland air is so dry, the stink of the enemy is peculiarly intense.

As ranges close, weapons fire escalates. Pintle mounts start to drum, making streams of heavy las and tracer dance and spit. Small-arms open up, and bolters too. The space between the two armies is suddenly frantic with exchanging fire. Men start to drop, knocked out of the foot columns behind the tanks. In the traitor host, storm shields ripple with impacts, and iron beasts wallop over with the clatter of plate.

Armies. It isn't two armies. Sigismund is fully aware of that. He's fielding a force that's outnumbered six or seven to one, perhaps more. His brigade is a fast combat unit. The enemy is a full compliance division. He can't win this, but he's laid his plans carefully. If fate allows, he can hurt the enemy grievously before death claims him.

Hurt them, as his father instructed.

Mortarion's warriors have weight of numbers, and they are all Astartes. They possess a strange, organic cohesion that seems to flow as one amorphous whole. Once again, Sigismund is reminded of creeping moulds and mycotoxic mildews. His force, though far smaller and less than fifty per cent Astartes, is fleet and disciplined. Every man in it knows his objective, and has the autonomy to pursue it even if the chain of command is broken.

His four cohorts are designed to furrow and split the enemy mass. A divided enemy can fall prey to confusion and poor reaction, and even the biggest army can become ineffective if its coordination is lost.

The first cohort, the largest, rams into the Death Guard line, armour first. Dozer blades have been lowered, and the main guns, declined to their lowest angle, continue to fire, shelling pathways into the traitor mass. The Astartes, led by the Imperial Fist Huscarl Artolun, one of Sigismund's most trusted men, maintain firing for as long as possible, forming shield lines that follow the armour in. The shield lines cover the more

vulnerable Excertus and Auxilia squads. Sigismund has drilled these soldiers personally. They know to work as squads, for no human can tackle an Astartes alone. They function as packs, loaders and munition bearers supporting the heavy crewed weapons, some of which were salvaged from defeated Mechanicum forces. Each pack targets individual enemy Astartes, like wolves on a bear, assaulting with las and flamers, while the heavy weapons – plasmics, meltas and Adrathics – inflict serious damage. They know to keep killing until an enemy is dead before acquiring another target. It is a hard mindset to achieve, because it makes them vulnerable, but those packs that can master the art score kills against foes that far outclass them.

Even so, they die. Despite the spitting devastation of the armour's side mounts, the moving picket of Artolun's shield lines, and the precise headshots of the Stratac and Geno marksmen with their overcharged long-las, wherever the Death Guard breaks through, a pack is mauled and finished in seconds.

The second cohort engages, then the third. Like the first, they have both struck at portions of the enemy line already weakened by the tread weapons, fissures in the Death Guard mass that they can wedge into and exploit. The second cohort drives into the right lateral extension of the enemy group, actually cutting the end of its line off from its main formation. The amputated section mills in gratifying disarray. The second cohort's guns punish it relentlessly. The Templar Oxaros, seconded by the fierce Salamander Rhi Echimar, holds second cohort true, and turns to shave another section off the Death Guard mass.

Third cohort, led by the Templar Antykus, ploughs into the furrow its guns have made. Heavy las and fusion mounts have superheated the ground, turning the dust into glass. Tank tracks grind over Death Guard plate made brittle by blast heat. Antykus' Excertus packs follow him in, as Artolun's followed him. They carry grenades and anti-armour launchers repurposed for Astartes-killing.

Sigismund's fourth cohort, the smallest, meets the Death Guard surge left of the central formation. Like each of the other intersections, he has planned this carefully. The others are designed to subdivide the mass and break its cohesion, or sow destruction into the densest formations. But there are other ways to disrupt an army too. You go for the head. And that's what Sigismund is good at. Head wounds.

His retinue crashes through the Death Guard shield wall. His lieutenants, Pontis of the Templar Brethren, and Faustal the Iron Hands Cataphractii, flank him. Myrinx of the Temple and the Fenrisian Janjar are at his heels. Their blades and bolters tear the Pale King's bloated, seeping warriors off their feet. There are flies everywhere, thicker than dust, their black bodies glinting like glass beads in the desert light.

But Sigismund can see his target. Skulidas Gehrerg, the Cadaver Lord, the gigantic and monstrous commander of the enemy host. As he hacks through the enemy ranks to reach him, Sigismund raises the black sword to his brow in brief salute.

9:ix

Instrument of Chaos

You have imagined this moment. You have savoured the prospect with an almost greedy anticipation. Now it's finally here.

So where, then, is your father's wrath? Where is His horror? Where is His… *anything*? You expected the chastising fury of an enraged patriarch, or the anguished pleading of a heartbroken parent. But He just stands there, staring at you.

Your glory is something to behold. You haven't seen Him for a long time. You've changed. You've grown. You're not the child He remembers. Maybe He needs a moment to accept that.

He's changed too. He seems small. A shadow of His former self. In truth, you were secretly afraid of this reunion. The father you remember was a huge and terrible force of majesty. His presence always overwhelmed you. At His side, long ago, during those thirty perfect years, you always felt safe and scared in equal measure. He was everything. You adored Him with every fibre of your being. You flinched every time He spoke a word.

But look at Him. *Look* at Him. Oh, He still appears impressive. The golden armour glinting in its own sunlight. The mantle about His shoulders like a cloak of silks cut from the finest damask nightfall and the richest royal blood. The stature. The serenity. The long and gleaming black hair. The noble, haloed face. The crown of radiance that rests upon Him. The Imperial *aspect*.

But He *does* seem small. It's the natural way of things, you presume. To a child, a father seems an infallible, perfect giant. But the child grows up. He begins to notice the flaws and imperfections. The child matures, and the father grows ever

smaller and more frail. You wonder that you were ever cowed by Him. You have outgrown Him. This, *this* is what you were afraid of? This, a man in antique armour, come to remonstrate with you and exert His authority? He still thinks He can subdue you with the merest look or utterance.

Not any more.

You realise you have always been afraid of what you thought He was, not what He actually is. You hope His silence indicates that He has reached a similar conclusion. It is time for Him to be afraid of you.

Perhaps He's choosing his words carefully–

+You have killed my son.+

So now He speaks. It was clearly the shock that rendered Him dumb. *Yes, father. I have. I have nothing to hide. The body is there for all to see. Consider it a statement of my intent.*

You feel a pang of regret. If Sanguinius had not been quite so defiant, if he had not been quite so *Sanguinius*, well, then this moment would have been more satisfying.

'I offered him a place beside me,' you say, with a note of sadness that is quite authentic. 'I didn't want to kill him. He could have stood at my side, just as you can stand at my side. But he refused, to my regret. His refusal made his death necessary. It was my only recourse. I know you understand, father. You are an entirely rational man. I inherited my rationality from you. Poor Sanguinius, his execution was the only rational–'

+You have killed my son.+

What is this? Is His trauma so deep that He can do nothing but repeat Himself? Why is He not listening?

'I offered him a position of power in the new order,' you say, with less compassion. Your father is beginning to aggravate you. You gesture, proudly, at the five waiting thrones. 'He could have sat at the right hand of the incarnate,' you say. 'He

did not see the way of it. He did not appreciate the fundamental state-change of the cosmos. There is me, or there is nothing. He chose to align himself with nothing, and death was the consequence. I hope it's not a mistake you will replicate, father. Again, I cite the fact that you are a supremely rational man. Grasp your lack of choice in this situation. Accept my offer, which I extend with a full heart. I am the Master of Mankind now, father. I would gladly have you stand at my right hand, so we can shape the future together. Nothing would make me happier. We will be as we were, all those years ago, side by side. But this time I can lift the bulk of that burden from you, and spare you the toil, so that you may take ease and rest as your reward for a long life of service to humanity. You need do nothing more than sit upon a throne–'

'My King-of-Ages will not accede to your demands, or accept any offer to surrender.'

What's this now? Who dares–

Ah, He has brought others with Him. You spot them now. So insignificant, you barely noticed them. If your father seems small, they seem like ants. Where are your hosts, father? Where are your proud armies and conquering Legions? You come here with, what, two Astartes Space Marines and a single Custodian? Is that the best you could muster? Is that all that survived? Oh, father. How are the mighty fallen.

The Custodes Sentinel is the one who spoke. He has stepped forward, still smeared in Sanguinius' blood, while one of the Astartes struggles to set down the Angel's corpse and the other cowers beside your father. Non-entities. They have no place here.

'My King-of-Ages demands your immediate surrender.'

The damn Custodian is becoming impertinent. He's a proconsul, from his armour. They were always so aloof and autocratic. You seize his name. It's floating in his surface thoughts. Caecaltus Dusk, a proud Hetaeron. He has no business addressing you. This isn't the Throne Room. This is your Court.

‘Be silent,’ you tell him. ‘My father and I have business to discuss.’

+Why?+

What a strange question. What is it that your father doesn’t understand?

‘You ask me why?’ you say. ‘Why what?’

+Why?+

‘I think you have suffered too great a shock, father,’ you say gently. ‘You are not making sense. What are you asking me? Why did I kill the Angel? Or why do I offer–’

+Why?+

Oh yes, you see it now. Just like the old days. Those thirty years of learning His shorthand, learning to read His gnomic comments. Thirty years of Him expecting you to fill in the gaps and comprehend everything intended by an inscrutable remark. Thirty years of being afraid to get it wrong. He means why in the most fundamental sense.

‘Why are we at war?’ you ask. Have all those millennia taught Him nothing? Or does He just want to hear you say it? Does He want to flex His authority and make you say it? Well, appease Him. He deserves some consideration.

‘Father, you know why,’ you say. ‘Something, perhaps some timidity, made you stop short of binding the forces of Chaos. You could have harnessed Chaos, but you merely aggravated it. You could have claimed ultimate power for the good of mankind, but you did not. So I have. I have done what you could or *would* not do. I have bound the powers of the warp, and I will lead humanity where you could not lead it, to a new and endless age of supremacy. I think it’s time you accepted my offer. I think it’s time you acknowledged my triumph. Kneel, father, please, and I will spare you. Then this will all be over.’

‘No man who ever lived can master Chaos.’

Again, the upstart proconsul, presuming to speak for his king.

‘I told you to be silent,’ you say.

‘You believe the Emperor weak not to have followed this course. Timid, you said.’

Now it’s one of the Astartes! He steps forward, the Angel’s blood wet on his hands.

‘Know your place!’ you bark at him.

‘This was my place,’ he replies.

Oh.

Oh, how a heart might break when a father sees his son again! After all this time, a son so changed! It is *Garviel*. It is poor Garviel, who was once your favourite.

You swallow. You did not expect this. You wish he didn’t have to see you like this, or witness this moment. You could have embraced poor Loken to your bosom later, when all this was over. Or perhaps it would have been better that he died long-since and had never come here.

‘Garviel…’ you murmur.

‘You have deluded yourself, great Lupercal,’ Loken says to you. ‘You are the servant of Chaos, not its master.’

‘What would you know of this, Garviel?’ you ask, stung by his words.

‘Everything, now, father,’ he replies.

This moment is spoiled. You didn’t want Loken here. Your heart aches. For a father to see his son again, after all this time, and hear him speak such words. And they think *you’re* the monster! You, with tears on your face at the sight of your favourite child, and your father, your damn father, still impassive and without affect despite the ruined corpse of *His* favoured son on the deck at His heels!

‘Please relent,’ Loken says to you. ‘Now, before it is too late. You are deluded.’

You try to ignore him. Your father has clearly recruited him and brought him here to prey upon your emotions and get you to lower your guard. A cheap trick. And look at Him! Your father, showing absolutely no emotion of His own.

‘Speak!’ you hiss. ‘Speak, father. Say something. Say something relevant. Say something that actually *matters*. Tell me you’re sorry for withholding the truth from us! Tell me you’re sorry for causing this war! Say something! Show me something! Kneel! At least you can do that! Kneel and submit!’

+Why?+

You’re going to have to kill Him. You suspected you might have to. You thought you’d be sorry if it came to it. But you’re not sorry. Not at all. He hasn’t changed. If anything, He’s worse. Just staring at you with those expressionless eyes–

No. Not at you.

He’s not staring at you. This whole time, He hasn’t been looking at you at all. And nothing He’s said, since He walked into your Court, has been directed at you either. It’s as if you’re not even there.

He’s looking past you. He’s looking into the shadows behind you.

You turn to see what’s so damn fascinating that He can’t take His eyes off it long enough to pay you the respect that is due–

And there they are. Of course. You knew they were there. You just didn’t know anybody else could see them. Lurking there in the shadows, in the psychofractal darkness that simmers behind you. The Old Four. All of them. You’ve never seen them so close. You’ve never seen them manifest so completely. They are huge. So beautiful. They’ve come to witness this moment.

Your father has been talking to them. Watching them. When He said, ‘You have killed my son,’ the fool hadn’t meant Sanguinius. He had been talking to them about you.

He considers you dead. Dead and lost.

He's not interested in you at all.

Well, father, you *should* be.

You raise your right hand, the claws drawn together. You hear Garviel and the arrogant proconsul cry out a warning.

Your father will feel the true nature of your power. *Then* let them tell you that you are deluded.

You let the power loose.

You strike your father down.

9:x

The final cut

Oll watches John fiddle with the torquetum. The intricate little device doesn't seem to want to fix. Oll's jet pendulum was just as unreliable.

'Maybe it's the storm,' John says, making another adjustment.

'Maybe,' Oll nods. The warp storm, the prevailing immaterial conditions, the sheer instability of everything… They are all factors now. Plotting a course, a risky business at the best of times, now seems impossible. None of the archaic winds listed in his charts blow in these new latitudes.

'We need a bearing,' says John.

'We absolutely need a bearing,' Oll agrees. One false cut, one wrong step, and they're dead. The knife hangs impatiently in his hand.

John tries again, resetting the device. Oll waits. The shadows are closing in through the ruins around them, as though some terrible nightfall is finally approaching. The sickly wind has picked up, and it's gusting dust and dead leaves down the inevitable street outside the doorway where they are sheltering.

Oll steps onto the dusty street.

'Actae?' he says into the wind.

John glances at him, then continues with his work.

'Actae? Are you still there? Can you still hear me?'

Nothing replies except the wind.

'Actae?' he calls out.

She limps through the dead city. Her strength is slowly returning, but her body feels strange and unfamiliar. She sees the dark smudge of her reflection in the dirty glass of dead-eyed windows. Just a ghost. She sees the small shape of her shadow on the cobbles, and is surprised there is enough of her left to cast one.

There will be a way out of this, somehow. She is determined to fulfil the trust Lord Dorn placed in her.

The voice comes out of nothing, as if it has rolled off the split tiles of nearby eaves, or dripped down a broken drainpipe into a gutter. She stops, crooks her head, and listens.

There, again, a wind-whisper.

Actae.

'Ollanius?' she says, out loud.

Actae.

He's still alive. Between the storm of the Dark King's mysterious passing and the pain of her many deaths, she'd lost track of him, no longer able to sense him. But now she can hear him again.

+Ollanius?+

Actae? Can you hear me? Are you still alive?

+I am. I have been freed. Where are you?+

His answer is indistinct.

+Where are you?+

She seeks him with her mind, turning in a slow circle in the empty street. There. There. Oh, so far away! Yet there he is, and John is with him.

But they are an impossible distance from where she stands. It would take her years to reach them.

+Ollanius?+

Actae. We need your help. There's no time to explain, but we need your help.

‘Can you hear me?’ Oll asks the wind. ‘Actae? We need your help. You said you could guide us. I have the knife. Do you understand? I have the knife. I need to reach Him.’

John has given up trying to make the torquetum work. He’s come to the door to watch Oll, brow furrowed.

‘Is she there?’ he asks.

Oll shakes his hand to hush him, listening to the wind.

‘Actae?’

+I can hear you, Ollanius. You intend to use the knife? To make a cut? This is how you hope to reach him?+

‘Yes,’ Oll nods. ‘Yes. But we can’t get a bearing.’

+It is an extremely risky proposition.+

I understand that.

+I hope so. There is very little chance of it working. You will most likely be destroyed by the warp.+

I know. We have to try.

Actae stands stock-still in the narrow, empty street. She concentrates. She raises her arms from her sides, feeling her way across the empyric contours of the world. In the cracked shop windows in front of her, her reflection, a black blur, does the same, mimicking her.

Actae? Can you guide us?

+Wait. I am trying to divine your position relative to mine. There.+

And Him? His position?

+Wait.+

She focuses her mind. Like her limbs, her mind still seems unfamiliar. It feels fresh and raw, newborn. Such acts of etheric sorcery were once so easy for her. This is much harder than when she scanned the realm to help Lord Dorn. The injuries she endured, the deaths, they must have weakened her

more than she thought. That, or the warp storm has grown even worse since then.

The Emperor's light has all but vanished. It is almost lost in the surrounding darkness. She sees it gutter at the very edges of her mindsight's reach. She cannot keep it in view long enough to trace its location.

It is eclipsed and shrouded by the shadow of something much darker and much bigger. A shadow that stares back at her.

Actae?

+Ollanius? Can you cut your way to me? If you were here, it would be easier to lead you. Ollanius?+

'No,' Oll says. 'That's an even bigger risk, and we don't have time.'

John steps out into the street, watching Oll with puzzled intent.

'Is it her?' he asks. 'What's she saying?'

Oll hushes him again, concentrating as hard as he can. He reaches out and takes the wraithbone torquetum from John's hand.

'Actae?' he says. 'Help me set the bearing. Triangulate us. Please, we have one shot at this.'

+Wait.+

'All right.'

Oll waits, the device open in his palm, the knife ready in his other hand. John watches, edgy and nervous. The wind shifts and gusts along the street with a rattle of leaves.

John turns and raises his weapon. He strides to the corner of the building, and checks the adjacent street. It's definitely movement. Those Merudin reavers are circling back. Them, or another marauding unit like them. Two, three minutes, and they'll be in sight.

He scurries back to Oll.

‘We don’t have long,’ he says urgently. ‘We do it now, Oll, or we find cover.’

Oll nods.

‘Actae? Please. We need to go now. Can you fix the Emperor’s position relative to yours and mine?’

Actae?

+No.+

She swallows hard, her arms starting to tremble. Her reflection in the filthy glass wobbles, arms shaking, mocking her.

Actae?

+I cannot divine his position, Ollanius. He is no longer the beacon-light he once was. But–+

But? But what?

+I can fix the location of the shadow that conceals him.+

That, then! That’s enough.

+Ollanius, you know what that shadow is–+

I don’t care. If they’re together, it doesn’t matter. In fact, it matters more. I need to get the knife to Him before–

+Very well. I can do no more than warn you.+

She breathes hard. She focuses her mind to a pinpoint. She uses the mocking ghost of herself reflected by the window as a drishti point.

Slowly, as clearly as she can, she gives him the bearing. It is the dark heart of everything, the vanishing point of the inevitable, the singularity of neverness in the centre of the world, the bloodshot eye of a storm that no sane soul would ever seek to visit.

Oll listens carefully. He sets the torquetum’s dial with as much accuracy as his shaking hands can manage.

‘Oll!’ John hisses.

‘I’ve got it,’ Oll says.

‘For god’s sake, Oll,’ John snaps. He’s got his back to Oll, covering the end of the street with his gun. They can both hear the crunch and scuff of approaching footsteps, the clink of weapons, the rough bark of voices instructing a combat spread. John’s placed himself in front of Oll, covering his body with his own, his carbine sighted from the shoulder to fire the moment anything comes into view around the street corner.

‘Hurry!’ he urges.

‘I’ve got it,’ Oll repeats. The torquetum’s set. He lines it up, panning it to his left until he finds the precise angle of incision.

‘Oll, please, for the love of–’

‘I’ve got it,’ Oll insists. There’s the line. He raises the old knife, and makes a long, single, vertical cut in the air in front of him. Materia resects, like taut flesh peeling back. There is an ugly wound in the air, bleeding ugly light.

+Go if you’re going, Ollanius. Push on. Do those good works.+

‘John! Come on! Now!’ Oll yells. He steps towards the wound.

At the street’s end, the first of the Merudin appear. One yells out. Another points. Two others open fire.

Las-bolts sting past John and Oll. John fires back, a crackling burst. He doesn’t wait to see if he’s hit anything. He turns, shoves Oll into the sliced-open air, and leaps in after him.

+Ollanius?+

She waits.

+Ollanius?+

They’ve gone. She can no longer sense them. John and Ollanius have vanished from her mindsight. She is suddenly entirely certain she will never see either of them again.

She lets her concentration release. Suffocating tension floods out of her, and is replaced by gnawing exhaustion. She stumbles forward weakly, and reaches out to steady herself against the wall and the window sill. Her reflection stumbles forward to meet her.

Breathing hard, almost panting, she tries to straighten up. She finds her own eyes in the glass, staring back at her.

She looks at herself for a long time. Close up, the details of her reflection are much clearer.

‘Oh,’ she says. ‘Oh.’ What she sees reflected explains so very much. She reaches a hand to her cheek.

She hears voices. She turns away from the window panes. There is no longer time for self-examination. Men are approaching. She can smell their minds and their hostility. Hort Lupercali. Merudin 20th. They are killers, and they’ve got her scent.

She starts to run, clumsy and ungainly on her unfamiliar legs. The voices behind her grow louder, calling to each other. She glances back.

She sees the traitor troops, filthy and murderous, hurrying down the street in pursuit. She runs faster, hoisting up the torn hem of her dress to free her legs. The first shots crack by, blowing out a window, a roof tile, a chunk of wall.

They’re going to catch her. They’re going to kill her.

And when they find out she can’t die, they’re going to keep killing her anyway.

9:xi

Control

Twenty minutes into the fight. Twenty minutes exactly. Twenty eternal minutes since his company materialised on the traitor flagship. Twenty minutes of hell to reach this point. Pinned against a bulkhead by six Justaerin Terminators, the Master of the Justaerin's power fist crushing Constantin's throat, the Master of the Justaerin's blade stuck through his gut.

'You never liked us, did you, old man?' Sycar growls through his visor speaker. They are locked almost nose to nose.

'You never gave me much reason to,' Constantin replies, blood welling from his mouth. He tries to break free, but his wounds are grim. He's weakening, and the grip of the brutes pinning him is reinforced by Cataphractii power.

Sycar chuckles.

'You're the one dying,' he says. He twists the blade that's run through Constantin's lower torso. Valdor convulses in pain. The pain's real enough. It's so severe, Constantin's consciousness greys. His strength is leaving him as rapidly as his blood. His left arm is pinned. He can't wield the spear.

The Justaerin want him dead.

And Sycar wants the kill. He wants to be the man who slew the great Valdor. He wants it to last. He wants to be able to tell his brothers how he made Valdor suffer, how he made Valdor struggle and scream. He wants to own the story of Valdor's bad and messy end, alone and screaming in the dark.

'Hold him!' Sycar snarls to his men.

The Master of the Justaerin twists the blade again. He gets to relish a second spasm of pain. Then he gets Valdor's right fist

in the side of the head.

There's no room for a proper swing. It's more of a jab. But he's Constantin Valdor. His auramite knuckles dent the left cheek of Sycar's faceplate.

The Justaerin redouble their efforts to pin him and hold him fast. Sycar's left hand increases its choke-hold. Sycar's right rams the blade impaling Valdor right up to the hilt. Valdor punches again, then keeps punching. It takes eight rapid, repeated blows. By the third, Sycar's visor is cracked. By the fourth, his left optic slot is crazed. The fifth sends fragments of visor plate and hammerscale flying. The sixth snaps Sycar's armoured head sideways.

The seventh forces the Master of the Justaerin to release the choke-hold in a frantic attempt to pin and block Constantin's fist. But that just gives Constantin more clearance to make the eighth a proper swing. That mashes Sycar's faceplate entirely and knocks the Master of the Justaerin reeling.

Constantin roars, and shrugs Sycar's Terminators off. Gustus steadies his master before he sprawls. Rindol heaves his warhammer at Constantin. Constantin tries to turn and parry the swing, but Sycar's blade has gone so deeply through Valdor's gut it's actually nailed him to the bulkhead behind him. Pinned to the wall, he can't evade. The hammerhead strikes his right shoulder, shatters his pauldron, fractures his scapula, cracks his ribcage.

Unpins him.

He lands on his hands and knees, Sycar's blade still through him. The Terminator swings the hammer down at his spine.

Constantin thrusts his spear up and back. It punches through Rindol's groin and emerges through his shattered sacrum and back plate. Constantin grips the spear haft to pull himself upright, levering Rindol off his feet and onto his back.

A moment passes, as the memories of another man's worthless life wash through him.

‘Otun Rindol,’ Valdor growls. He yanks the spear out, rotates it, and assumes a braced proffer. The Justaerin, all of them, are backing away up the slanted chamber in semicircle formation.

Really? They back off so easily? And they wonder he has never thought much of them.

No, something else. He sees Sycar, blood seeping from his torn visor, flashing hand signals. XVI battle code. Like Valdor doesn’t know every Legion’s battle code.

Order given. Disengage.

To Valdor’s left, Proconsul Hykanatoi Ludovicus finishes his own struggle. He twists the head off the Terminator he was grappling with, lets the body fall, and drops the head to bounce away down the slanted deck.

‘My captain,’ he says. ‘Pursuit?’

Ludovicus is blind in one eye and drenched in blood. He has lost all his weapons during the savage, close-quarters brawl.

‘Wait,’ says Constantin.

‘My captain…’ Ludovicus says, rather more hesitantly. He gestures at Valdor. Valdor looks down. Sycar’s sword is still wedged through his body. He wrenches it out, then rests it, tip down, so he can lean on it while he bites down the pain.

Noises behind them. Telamok, Maezari and Proconsul Kupalori have finally caught up with them. The three Sentinels enter the compartment behind them, weapons ready.

‘You’ve driven them back, my captain,’ says Telamok.

‘Pursuit formation,’ Kupalori instructs.

‘Wait,’ Ludovicus advises. He glances at Valdor.

‘It’s a feint,’ Constantin confirms. ‘I saw them signal. They’re drawing us.’

‘That lacks tactical logic,’ says Telamok.

‘Nevertheless,’ says Constantin. They had us cold, he thinks. They killed Erastes, and had me and Ludovicus cold. A pack

of Justaerin Terminators. They could have finished the job. But they've pulled back, and given us the chance to regroup.

'A trap, then?' says Maezari.

'Evidently,' Constantin replies.

'Evasion, flank advance, counter-position?' asks Ludovicus.

'No, let's find out what the bastards think constitutes a trap,' Constantin replies. 'Advance, on me, but with situational awareness.'

They approve his method. It's typical of Valdor to recognise that the best way to break a trap's mechanism is to get inside it.

He hands Sycar's warblade to Ludovicus.

'Use this,' he says. 'Return it to the Master of the Justaerin with my compliments.'

He starts to make his way up the sloping deck with his men at his heels. They follow the retreating Terminators up-hull.

They get another fifty metres, working their way into a large engineering space where the air is tinted with a fog of rust particles. The deck tilts up at an even steeper angle where the orbital plate hull has landed unevenly and buckled. Canisters, crates and other unsecured objects have collected at the lower end, and the chains of hoists and skeins of torn cable no longer hang straight down to the deck.

Constantin knows something's wrong the moment they force entry and clamber over the piles of loose materiel. It's not synergertics or sensoria, it's some kind of awareness in him, as though the arcane knowledge he has progressively accumulated via the spear has heightened his sensitivity to the currents of the warp.

He calls out a warning. The world is already shifting. The ceiling shreds open, peeling back like skin, flooding them with daylight. Dark figures leap down through the rent to assail them.

One lands in front of Constantin. Though it is large, and heavily plated, it lands almost softly, as though unseen forces have carried it through the air and set it down gently.

It's Abaddon.

Constantin reacts instantly. Less than instantly. He drives his spear with a perfect underarm thrust to pierce the traitor's chest. It is a killing stroke, a display of the pinnacle speed and reaction of the Legio Custodes, an action that no Astartes could match or withstand.

The spear stops short of Abaddon's breastplate. The sudden arrest of its motion jolts Constantin like a whipcrack. Abaddon's left hand has closed around the spear-tip and stopped it, despite the immense strength driving the thrust. A few beads of bright blood well up between Abaddon's knuckles where he is gripping the spear blade.

Constantin, open-mouthed in shock, feels the moment. The heartbeat. The flood of understanding drawn by the spear. The world sags, and yaws, losing definition and dimension.

It is twenty-five minutes into the fight. It is an hour into the fight. It is a year into the fight. It is a century–

It is a hundred centuries into the fight. The fight has no end. It is a long war that slices eternity lengthways with its appalling duration. A blizzard of embers billows past him, and each one is a burning world. The whole galaxy is in flames.

The knowledge transmitted down the haft of the spear and into his soul is not the name of a dead thing that Constantin can take power over. It is not some buried warp-secret or scrap of encrypted lore that he can learn. He can't control it, because it is already controlled. Everything he has learned of Chaos until this moment has shown it to be an essence that lives up to its inadequate name: a chaos, a fevered, contradictory maelstrom that has no single impulse, but which churns without logic or motivation, and eats itself, and wars with itself, and whips and tears against itself in a frenzy, its myriad

parts as likely to annihilate each other as they are to turn their wild malice upon realspace and materia.

But this is complete. It is whole. It is focused. It is a Chaos undivided, condensed into one atrocious force by the imposition of an incalculable willpower. Constantin is staring at the future from his time-lacking vantage point of the *Vengeful Spirit*'s deconstructed heart. He is gazing down ten thousand years at a far future that is ten thousand years old, a future that gazes back at him as though it is standing right in front of him. It is Chaos entire, chained and enslaved, alloyed into one lethal spear-tip that will pierce the Imperium of Man and ensure its loss. The cutting edge of a legion in black. The unequivocal symbol of death.

There is nothing else to learn or know. There is only war. War, and a single name that is the worst fortune any deck of prophesy cards can ever overturn.

'Despoiler,' he whispers.

The revelation is so foul, Constantin recoils.

He lets go of the spear. It's the only thing that Abaddon will not expect him to do. No Custodian ever relinquishes his weapon, especially one so potent. He lets go of the spear before Abaddon has realised what he's done and drives his fist into Abaddon's face. The First Captain buckles. He's still gripping the spear-tip in his left hand. He swings it by the tip, a makeshift weapon to drive Constantin back. The captain-general and the spear tumble backwards across the deck, because the deck is no longer tilted. It is turning. The orbital plate wreck is turning. Local reality, tenuous at best, rotates. Deck becomes wall. Wall becomes deck. Loose objects and debris tumble and roll, bounce and collide. Constantin falls towards the wall, but the turning continues, and he is suddenly falling towards what was once the ceiling. He is falling, limbs milling, towards the hole ripped in the roof. He is falling towards daylight, towards the sky. It is a bright abyss, opened in the ground below him, and he is plunging into it. Reality is bending and transmuting to someone's will.

A screaming has begun. A keen, shrill shriek that cracks the air around them all with its constant, drawn-out howl. It's not the voices of the Neverborn. It's reality wailing in distress.

Constantin hits the ceiling beside the open tear. The ragged edge of the hull digs into his belly, and his legs slide off into empty air. Reality is still inverting and screaming. He tries to hold on. The falling spear strikes the edge of the tear beside him, and wedges fast, tip down in the hull. Constantin grabs for it, but his weight plucks it out, and he slides over the edge.

He grabs, frantically, and manages to grasp a hoist chain that is hanging past him out of the roof-tear, and dangling into the sky. He swings from it, his grip slowly failing.

The vast sky, churning with storm-clouds and flecks of lightning, yawns below him like an endless sea. The broken back of the orbital plate, and the charred landscape around it, sprawls above him where the heavens should be. Everything is vibrating from the unending, piercing scream. As Constantin's hand begins to slip on the greasy links of the heavy hoist chain, he sees back into the inverted engineering compartment above him. His Sentinel Companions have all fallen like him, thrown over by the impossible inversion. They are all struggling to hold on, clinging to bulkheads and ceiling structures, feet swinging.

Abaddon, and the Sons of Horus around him, have not fallen. They remain upright, upside down, still planted securely and without effort on the capsized deck. They move, walking calmly, as normally as on level ground. A figure walks with them. Constantin knows it at once. Erebus.

The warp sings through the Dark Apostle. Constantin can feel the heat of it. His lips are moving, uttering words that batter the soul. This madness is his doing.

Abaddon reaches Maezari, and decapitates him with a single blow. Maezari's head and body drop onto the ceiling below. Praetor Zeletsis slices through Telamok's arms, and Telamok plunges. He deflects off the lip of the rent and then falls past Constantin into the sky, spinning and glinting until he is out of

sight. Hellas Sycar drives his power fist into Proconsul Kupalori with such force Kupalori's head and chest are compacted into what was once the compartment wall, and he is left hanging there, limbs slack, crushed into the metal.

Abaddon, hymned by the senseless, deafening screeching of wounded materia, walks calmly down the wall and across the ceiling, Erebus at his side. The First Captain reaches Ludovicus. The proconsul can't defend himself. Abaddon runs his traitor blade through Ludovicus, then plants one foot against the proconsul to draw the blade back out. Released, Ludovicus' corpse falls, glances off a hoist, then collides with Constantin as it plummets into the open sky.

The impact breaks Constantin's grip.

Impaled, Valdor fights back against Sycar of the Justaerin.

9:xii

Break Point

This is Sigismund's temple. The heart of battle is his place of worship, the naked blades his consecrated articles of faith. War is the expression of his devotion.

He's inside the Death Guard mass, and he is not alone. The coiling roar of battle wraps him and his Seconds like chains, and he breaks those chains with every blow. This is butcher-work. He saves his finesse for the Cadaver Lord, where every ounce of it will matter.

Myrinx of the Temple reaches Skulidas Gehrerg first, but Skulidas skewers him with his broadsword in seconds. Myrinx is a seasoned warrior, and a fine swordsman, but Skulidas' sword is a seeping, diseased blade of dirty bone. It breaks Myrinx's spatha as he tries to engage, then plunges through the Templar's war-shield and body as one, pinning the black-and-white shield to his chest.

Sigismund lays in as Myrinx topples. The Cadaver Lord's sword comes out of Myrinx to meet him. Skulidas doesn't have to wrench it free or pluck it clear. The ugly brown blade simply slides out of corpse and armour like a spoon through broth.

Sigismund barely blocks it. He feels pain transmitted through his black sword into his hand and wrist, not from the considerable impact, but as though his blade has been hurt by mere contact with his enemy's weapon. He is forced to counter, fending off two more whirling slices, and each one fires neuropathic distress up his sword-arm.

Skulidas Gehrerg was a noted master of swords back in the time before. Sigismund is not sure what he is now. Skulidas is bulked with mass to such an extent that additional panels of plate have been hinged to his original armour segments to

maintain body coverage. His great mass isn't the bloat that seems to afflict so many of Mortarion's sons. It is a thickening of bone and sinew, an addition of slabby muscle. His skewer-sword is an organic spike of old bone, dark as mahogany, and its blade is knotted at regular intervals as though by knuckles or vertebrae. What Sigismund thought, from a distance, to be a flying cloak around the Cadaver Lord's shoulders, is a dense cloud of flies that trails him and moves with him like a flock of starlings, a million organisms obeying one impulse.

The stench of him is dire. Skulidas roars at Sigismund, an animal challenge, and the snout of his vibrating helm articulates apart to allow him to do so, as though the cheek and jowl plates and chin guard have become fused to the flesh beneath and become part of his face. Sigismund tries not to blanch at the organic horror he glimpses inside that maw.

Sigismund renews his assault. Skulidas is a traitor champion. Skulidas is his prey. Experience has proven to Sigismund that a whole battalion or army can be brought to breaking point if its leader is destroyed. All hope of his strike force prevailing against this Death Guard formation depends on his success.

But he cannot land a blow. Skulidas' skewer-blade is too fast, and its reach too great. The traitor has brute strength, but whatever has diseased him, it seems to have enhanced his swordcraft. Astartesian skills and techniques often seem degraded by the gifts of Chaos, or forgotten in the indulgence of raw power, but in Skulidas' case, the blessings of the Neverborn seem to have increased his original prowess, and distilled it into a superlative mastery of the blade.

Or is it the sword? Yes, Sigismund thinks, as he parries with increasing desperation to protect his head and throat, it is Gehrerg's foul blade that has the swift skill and lethal technique. It whines and turns and shivers in the air, all but dragging Skulidas after it. The meat and muscle Gehrerg has grown are simply to compensate for its furious pull, so he can keep a grip on it.

Sigismund's arm is growing numb from the nerve pain communicated by his sword. He knows his sword is the only thing keeping him alive. Its lustrous black edge is in part proofed against the bone blade's infectious horror. A lesser blade, like Myrinx's, would have snapped like glass.

Skulidas gets past his guard, and lands a blow that slices a curl of plasteel off the rim of Sigismund's left pauldron. The pauldron does not crack or break: it simply parts like water beneath the traitor blade's edge without impact or resistance.

Sigismund can let no part of himself touch Skulidas' blade. He's sure the merest scratch would open a mortal wound, or kill him with instant septic shock. His black blade is the only thing immune. He can fend the lethal sword away with it, but Skulidas is swift. Sigismund can't follow a parry with a strike before another fending clash is needed.

But the blade is not the only dangerous part of a sword. Sigismund pushes in, trading blows, pressing tighter for a hard parry against the forte of Skulidas' blade, closer to the hilt, where he can exert the most leverage. When he gets it, Sigismund does not repeal: he lunges closer still, with his full body weight, using his blade to press Skulidas' down and away, and pin it aside. He holds it. They struggle for an instant, strength against strength, the bone-blade blocked. Then Sigismund grasps the unsharpened ricasso of his black sword in his left hand and, with both hands, rams the whole weapon backwards like a club, and drives the pommel into Skulidas' face.

His visor split and leaking, the Cadaver Lord jolts away, his head snapped back. The bone-blade swings up eagerly, freed from its block, but Sigismund has already whipped the black sword around in a double-grip underhand slash that cuts Skulidas' exposed throat.

The Cadaver Lord falls. His bone-blade falls with him, and lies twitching and helpless on the bloody ground. The cloak of flies falls too: it falls onto Skulidas like a shroud, pouring in through the joints of his plate to feed on his still-hot corpse.

Sigismund turns, and fights off other attackers. He's anticipating the reaction, the wash of unrest that bathes an enemy force when its leader falls, the pivot-point of falter and dismay that he and his Seconds can use to shift the balance of the battle.

It doesn't come. The Death Guard fights on, oblivious to the loss. Sigismund, master of single combat, understands the terrible strength of his enemy clearly at last. It fights as a whole, like some colonial hive, as unified in its intent as a swarm of flies. It cannot be confounded by a single loss, no matter how significant. It cannot be killed by a head wound.

Sigismund's fundamental methodology is useless.

He finds himself in a churning press with Pontis to his right and Janjar to his left. Faustal is dead. Most of the men who followed him in are gone. His bravura tactic, the only chance they had to win, is shot.

A chaos encloses him, a dozen swords and lances, and he feels a change in the enemy's temper. At first, he thinks – with what little wit he can spare to do anything other than fight – that it is the reaction after all, a delayed reaction to the Cadaver Lord's execution that has finally slid, belatedly, into the fever-fogged minds of the Death Guard.

But it isn't that. The Death Guard has recoiled because another army has joined the fight.

On what is now a memory of the Via Aquila, Keeler hears the echo of the voice. It was a war cry, unmistakably, a call to arms. But it was also a cry for help. The light of revelation is clearer than ever in her mind.

It is a strange kind of revelation. Keeler knows precisely what it wants of her, but not how or why. She has to trust it. She has to allow her faith to accept it. In this, she knows, she is akin to Sigismund. It is the same uncompromising devotion that spurred him to assault, directly, a far greater foe. His consideration was each step, each blow. He focused on what

he had to do, second by second, not on the outcome, because the outcome was not his concern.

The future is neither here, nor now.

She starts to walk towards the churning fight. There's no fear left in her. One step, then another, across the copper dust, striding calmly towards a maelstrom of violence that she cannot survive.

At first, she walks alone.

'Keeler! What are you doing?' Lord Zhi-Meng calls out behind her. 'Keeler!'

But others are walking too. One or two at first, then members of the conclave, and whole sections of the halted pilgrimage. They are either following her lead, or they are touched by the same certainty that she has felt. She sees Wereft, and Leeta Tang. They are almost abreast of her, walking in parallel. Leeta glances across at her, and smiles.

'North!' she calls out, and laughs.

Yes, there is a certainty. A strong and calming grace, a collective purpose that can no more be expressed than it can be denied. Behind her, the stilled column of the pilgrimage, that endless river of humanity, stirs and pours after her. There is little panic, and no haste. It follows her as it followed her from the very start.

'Keeler! Keeler!'

Limping and scurrying Zhi-Meng catches her up, supported by Perevanna.

'Keeler,' cries Zhi-Meng, gesturing at the carnage ahead with a dusty hand. 'They will kill us!'

'My lord,' she replies, 'they can't kill all of us.'

The Pale King's host shivers. Bathed in a mantle of ochre dust that it has kicked up, it is trying to clench itself to exterminate the fierce pockets of Sigismund's attack. Nearly two-thirds of

the Seconds have been killed. It is the verge of an outright rout.

But the Death Guard wavers. A sense of the approaching mass spreads through it, a distraction, a puzzle, an inexplicable event: thousands of people, tens of thousands, with a column of perhaps millions behind them stretching away as far as the arid horizon, approaching slowly, most of them unarmed, most of them startlingly composed and unafraid.

The traitors begin to turn, struck by indecision and confusion. Some manoeuvre to face the advancing host. In turning, they slacken their focus on the fight, and Sigismund's depleted forces are able to strike harder and deeper, breaking rank lines from within. The battle becomes clumsy and incoherent, as though the Death Guard's collective mindset prospered against individuals, but is perplexed by another large group acting in unity.

Some of the XIV line up and begin a repulse. They have no qualms about killing the unarmed and the civilian. It is not a lack of compunction. In their febrile minds, there is no distinction. A servant of the False Emperor is a servant of the False Emperor, in any guise. Once Sigismund and his fellow aggressors were finished, they would have turned on the rest anyway, and commenced a wholesale slaughter.

They are good at killing. They are cultured for it.

Bolters and heavy las begin to bark and spit. Holes begin to appear in the leading edge of the pilgrim tide as civilians are cut down or vaporised mid-step. But the inexorable flow of people does not abate.

Keeler sees mass-reactives scream past her. She feels the heat of their burning propellant. She hears the impacts. Blood dots her cheek. She smells fyceline. Las-bolts streak by, some so close she ought to flinch. She does not. She keeps walking.

The Death Guard doubles down. Rates switch to full-auto and rapid. There is nothing they cannot illuminate when they work together.

Even a million people.

Keeler keeps walking as dust and smoke fumes back across her. The air is shaking.

It is finally time the traitors showed them the respect they deserve. They've earned it. There is no longer any shame in death, nor any real pain. None of that matters any more. The only true pain is in failure, in refusal to resist, in loss of faith.

She won't submit. She won't go quietly. Armed or unarmed, she will stand for what she believes in.

She wonders, almost idly, what she will do when she finally reaches them, if she lasts that long. What could she do against an armed and armoured giant of the Legiones Astartes? She imagines she will grasp and claw and tear with her bare fingers against the unbreakable plate. It will have no effect. One pair of human hands can't tear down a Traitor legionary.

But a million? Two million? Three?

Like water lapping against rock, though it takes ten thousand years, the rock will wear away in the end. It is asymmetric warfare of the most perverse kind, the macabre logic imposed on mankind by the atrocity of Horus Lupercal's heresy. She will stand, and she will resist, for though the enemy is mighty and her one life is as nothing, the true souls of the Imperial faithful are many and numberless.

You had your chance, traitors. You should have bloody taken it. How do you like these odds?

She balls her fists, ready to do what she can. The chance doesn't come. She almost feels cheated. The tight ranks of the XIV collapse as they retreat before her. It isn't fear. She understands that completely. The Death Guard is not afraid of her, or the legions that walk with her. It is simply mystified. It is withdrawing askance, unable to make sense of what is happening, forced into a fall-back effort in order to process this turn of events, this thing that has never happened before.

Sigismund and his bloodied fighting groups take full advantage of the reversal, cutting loose at the enemy now

pouring back around them. Leading the harrying action, Sigismund sees that the XIV are trying to quit the field by means of a deep gorge that splits the line of mesas behind their field position. He ascends the gradient, killing as he goes. If the Death Guard withdraw into that geographical cover, they win time to regroup and rethink. They may have reinforcement strengths waiting in the deep shadows of the gorge.

He wants to break their resolve and their spines before they reach that safe haven. He needs time to rethink too. A glance over his shoulder shows him the impossible: the steady advance of the entire pilgrimage column soaking up the traitor resistance like blotting paper laid on a spill of ink. What madness has possessed them all?

Not madness. Whatever it is, he feels it too.

With Pontis and several others at his side, he fights his way along a climbing spur of ginger rock onto the scree slopes at the mouth of the gorge. Combat has become messy and entirely disjointed. He links up with the remnants of Artolun's cohort near the gorge's towering rock gateway, and they catch more Death Guard in a fierce pinch of crossfire. The enemy numbers, now lacking their inhuman coordination, are draining away down the ravine.

'Pursuit?' Artolun asks.

'Yes,' says Sigismund. They have to capitalise on this strange advantage before fortune snaps back against them again.

The gorge is a curious, cool twilight, broad enough for vehicles, but too tight and sheer-sided to project assurance. Odd, dry echoes skitter back from the high cliff walls. The stone and bedrock seems darker, as though composed of a blacker, igneous material. At first, Sigismund presumes this to be a consequence of the ravine's prevailing gloom, shutting out the glare that baked the desert flats to a cooked copper. But as they clamber their way along, picking off any of the XIV they overhaul, he sees that the rock is as black as anthracite, and gleaming as though wet. They engage three more times with packs of Death Guard, fights that turn into bloody

running melees along the base of the pass. It's hard to see what's waiting for them ahead. He begins to fear that he has overextended in his eagerness, and that his ragged mob of Seconds will suddenly run across a full enemy formation that has gathered to turn in reprisal.

When it comes, it comes suddenly, a ferocious barrage of bolt and las that kills six more of his men and drives the rest of them into cover. He sees a significant rearguard of the XIV moving slowly down the gorge towards them, firing as they come to drive off any pursuit.

The gorge lights up, flickering and jumping with weapon-flash. Other positions have opened fire, but these seem higher up in the cliffs above them, perhaps prepared emplacements mounting heavier weapons. His enthusiasm is being punished. The Death Guard did not withdraw out of confusion. It was a calculated effort to entice Sigismund's force into the kill-box of the gorge.

Except that the heavy, elevated fire is not falling on them. It is ripping across the squads of the XIV's rearguard.

'My lord!'

Over the shock-roar of gunfire, Sigismund hears Pontis cry out. He hurries to him, head down, using the ravine-floor boulders for cover.

Pontis has found steps, rock-cut into the side of the gorge. They are huge and old, and climb a short distance to something, a cave or fissure or–

'In the name of the Throne,' cries a voice from above, 'bring your men this way!'

Sigismund waves his men on, and makes his way up the steps in advance. The steps rise to a heavy stone platform cut from the black rock under an overhang of cliff. A figure waits there for him, the huge figure of an Astartes warrior. Sigismund can feel the guns trained on him from hidden vantage points above.

'Sigismund,' he says. 'The Emperor's Champion.'

‘Champion, indeed?’ the other replies. ‘Not the Sigismund that I recall. But I am glad of the sight of you, anyway. Are you a relief force come to aid at last?’

‘I was presuming the same of you,’ Sigismund replies.

The figure steps out of the cliff shadows. It is, beyond Sigismund’s capacity to explain, a senior lord of the Dark Angels.

‘Tragan,’ he says, ‘of the Ninth Order. Well met, Sigismund.’

‘What is this place, brother?’ Sigismund asks.

‘Our Chapter Master dubbed it Break Point,’ Tragan replies. ‘To you, it is the Septenary Portal of the Hollow Mountain.’

9:xiii

Together alone

She runs. The gunfire of the Merudin chases her down derelict streets that have been lifeless for lifetimes. Shots smash ancient windows behind her.

She ducks behind an old stone water trough. The shooting stops. They're coming closer. They think she's hit. She grabs some small chunks of broken flagstone, and the strip of torn skirt-hem from her pocket.

When she rises, one of the Merudin is less than ten metres away. He sees her, snatching his carbine up to fire. The loop of cloth is already spinning in her hand, weighted by its stone payload. The piece of broken flagstone snaps off like a bullet, and strikes him between the eyes. He looks surprised as he flops backwards.

She reloads her sling and starts to spin it again. A couple of shots come her way. More of the traitors have appeared. They're too far away, beyond the lethal range of her makeshift weapon. But she's well inside the lethal range of their lasrifles.

Frustrated fury fills her mind. But it clears it too. Her furious urge to survive strips away the fog of recent death and newborn befuddlement that has limited her.

She wants to throw the whole street at them, and she does. A dozen rocks and pebbles around her twitch and then fly at the traitors, harder and truer than any launched from a slingshot. Four men drop, dead or wounded. The others cry out and scrabble for cover.

She runs. Her inherited skills are a curious combination. She's getting used to this smaller, fitter frame, these younger limbs. This troubled blend of minds.

When the wall fell, they were crushed together. The rapport, the mental leash connecting them, remained. Dead, she lived, but not in the same vessel. She imagines her previous self, a cold and empty husk, still entombed under the rubble of the black wall.

But this is her previous self too. The girl is not gone. They're both here, not fighting for possession but fused in some strange symbiosis, mutilated together by extreme damage. Her body was ruined and dead, the girl's mind wounded. The only chance for survival was to salvage the working parts of both and blend them as one.

Without that conjunction, she would not have survived. Her telekine power might be reduced, but she has the girl's ferocity and wits, her lithe body, her ingenious defiance. Her eyes. She has–

No. *They*. They are both present. They have to start thinking in plural terms, but they both inhabit this flesh. She is mentally dominant, but the girl is physically in charge. And emotionally too. They will have to learn this fusion quickly, or insanity will be the only recourse. She realises, now she is inside, what strangely kindred spirits they are. They must share this telempathic rapport, perhaps forever.

More shots come, too close. She sees soldiers ahead of her, men with guns. They've encircled her. Damn it–

The men are firing past her. They're firing at the Merudin wretches.

'This way!' one shouts at her. He pulls her into cover, as his men blaze away at the approaching traitors.

He hauls her through a ruin into a small courtyard. He's Excertus, she thinks, filthy, his plain fatigues lacking significant insignia.

'Where the hell did you come from?' he asks.

'Out there,' she replies, because she doesn't know the name of anything.

‘Who’s this?’ asks a voice. A woman steps out of an oddly shadowed doorway into the yard. ‘Mikhail? Who is this?’

‘There are hostiles,’ the soldier says. ‘We’ve engaged. We found this girl running from them.’

The woman looks at her. She’s older, stern, an officer. Her cheek is torn, stitched and swollen.

‘Marshal Agathe,’ she says. ‘Antioch Miles Vesperi. I want to know your name.’

What name to give? What names still apply? Not Cyrene Valantion, or Actae, and not the half-hearted evasion of Katt. She dredges two sets of memories to find a name. The girl’s real name, buried for years, still fresh and barely used. That will do.

‘I am Katerina Moriana,’ she says.

‘And your business here?’

‘I am sent here to find help, mam,’ she says. ‘Charged by the highest authority to summon any and all who are capable of standing in the final fight.’

‘On what authority?’ the marshal asks.

Moriana shows her the seal of office.

‘The Lord Praetorian himself,’ she says.

9:xiv

Exit strategy

‘An extraction is not currently possible,’ Amon tells her. ‘As you can probably see,’ he adds, as an afterthought.

Andromeda-17 almost laughs, because it’s the closest thing to a joke she’s ever heard the Sentinel make. The fact that Amon is, as ever, deadpan, serves to underscore the wry nature of his remark.

The traitor Warmaster’s invasion of the final fortress has finally reached the threshold of the Retreat. Beyond the circulation trench, the eternal city is ablaze, engulfed in flames and obscured by a vast bank of toxic smog. On the far side of the Pons Aegeus, the concourse is littered with debris, and an increasing number of dead bodies. Warbands of Traitor Excertus are trying to cross the concourse to reach the head of the bridge, drawn by the curious, and as yet undamaged, old tower. Another edifice to sack and desecrate.

Amon is holding them at bay. He is standing at an armoured console just outside the portico. The console extended seamlessly from the plasteel deck when he initialised the Retreat’s defences. From it, with infinite calm, he is overseeing the repulse systems. Void shield generators, buried in the rim of the promontory and footworks of the bridge, have activated, sheathing the Pons Aegeus, the promontory, and the lower levels of the tower in shimmering fields. Slaved gun-mounts, fitted with quad-lascannons and needle Adrathics, have risen from hidden silos around the head of the bridge, the edge of the promontory, and the lower terraces of the tower. The Sigillite’s Retreat is a small fortress in its own right. Only the gun-mounts at the bridgehead are firing. Those on the promontory lip and the sides of the tower remain silent. They will commence firing, Andromeda understands, when the shields fail. Not if, *when*.

Hard rounds and las-bolts patter off the shields, causing fizzling ripples. Amon isn't even looking at the enemy. He watches his console display, directing response and fields of fire with a calm touch of his hand. The bridgehead gun-pods unleash economical bursts of fire into the gathering smoke. She sees advancing traitor squads mown down by the pinpoint las-fire, and individuals picked off by the thin, bright beams of the Adrathics.

'How long can we hold?' she asks.

'As long as power lasts,' he replies, his fingers directing a gun-mount to address another target cluster that the console has shown him.

'Which is how long?'

'Uncertain,' he replies.

A loud bang makes her flinch. Rocket grenades have thumped into the voids, making them shudder. Amon redirects a mount battery, and a squad of traitor grenadiers four hundred metres away on the concourse vanishes in a rapid blitz of heavy las.

'I am conserving,' he adds. 'The shields will withstand infantry assaults. But more significant threats will erode or break them.'

'Significant threats…'

'Armour units,' he says. 'Astartes.' He does not need to finish the list.

'Fo is done with his work,' she says. 'And he is becoming… less cooperative. We need to move him.'

'As stated, that is not an option.'

'There must be another way out of the tower, Amon,' she says. 'The Sigillite had devious ways of moving around the city. A subterranean–'

'I can find no trace of any exits on the schematics,' says Amon. He realigns another mount, and she hears the crackle of

las from beyond the shields. ‘The Retreat was a secure location.’

‘But you know this city!’ she insists. ‘You Custodes, constantly running your blood games to learn every last subduct and crawlspace–’

He looks at her suddenly.

‘I don’t know it any more,’ he says. It feels to her like this is an impossibly hard thing for him to admit. ‘The city has changed, Selenar. The warp has reconfigured it. Besides, the Sigillite’s Retreat was the one site kept private even from us. There may be secret means of egress. I don’t doubt that the Regent made such provision. But they are unknown to me, and I believe Xanthus would have told me if he’d known of any. They may no longer exist. If they do, I am not in a position to search for them.’

He turns back to the console and almost dispassionately directs the bridgehead batteries to bracket four new hostile icons that have moved into the tactical field of his sensoria.

She tries to answer, but the brief and furious gunfire drowns her out. The reek of ozone from the voids is making her throat raw.

‘What do we do, then?’ she asks when the noise subsides. ‘Just hope we can hold out until help arrives?’

‘There is no help coming,’ he says.

‘Amon–’

‘I have assessed the variables carefully,’ he says, patiently watching his display. ‘We cannot count on help or relief. We cannot contact the Throne Room or any higher authority. We cannot extract. We cannot hold off assault indefinitely. We have only one option. You must have arrived at the same conclusion.’

‘You’re considering–?’

‘Yes,’ he says. ‘We will deploy the weapon.’

She doesn't reply. He looks over at her.

'I see my decision has upset you,' he remarks. 'I do not take it lightly. I…'

He pauses, swallows.

'I have obeyed my duty function. I have followed my directives as issued to me. I have waited as long as possible for supplemental directives. This is not a choice I ever wanted to make. It should be the decision of better men. But they may all be dead already, and no supplemental instruction can be expected or authenticated. Everything we stand for is dying. I can act, or not act. I would rather face trial and execution, and the shame of generations, for making this decision in error, than not act while there was still a chance. I do not care about myself, or the punishment I might receive, or the burden of guilt I might have to bear. I serve the Emperor. I serve the Imperium. It must stand, Selenar. In the absence of any other evidence or intelligence, I must presume that the use of Fo's weapon has become an imperative. If we delay any longer, the chance will be lost.'

'It's a Tier XX terminus sanction,' she says. 'You will take this responsibility?'

'I have to.'

'Against my advice?'

'Your advice is not pertinent. The survival of the Imperium is the responsibility of the Legio Custodes, and I am the only one present.'

'So… we do this now?' Andromeda asks.

'The city is burning, Andromeda. The final fortress has fallen. If not now, when?'

She nods. The most painful, most pitiful thing she has ever heard is the tiny crack of emotion in his voice.

'Have Fo prepare the sanction weapon for immediate use,' Amon says. 'Specify target genestocks as Legio Astartes and primarch.'

‘You mean… Traitor?’ she queries.

‘The primarchs and their sons have brought us to this pass,’ he replies. ‘We trust no one. We trust nothing. We allow no sentiment or weakness to cloud our judgement or stay our hand. We must be certain. Do I need to repeat my directive?’

Andromeda-17 shakes her head. She turns, and hurries back into the tower. Amon regards his console. Eight new targets, including a brigade-strength mass, are moving into range on the concourse.

He aligns the batteries with a deft touch. The gun-mounts at the bridgehead begin to fire again. This time the bursts are not brief or sparing. They are sustained.

She runs up the winding stairs.

‘Xanthus!’

The air inside is cool. The sounds of meticulous carnage outside are muffled by the tower’s thick walls and damping fields.

‘Xanthus!’

Malcador’s laboratorium is deserted. She enters, hearing the constant hum and chatter of the cogitators and splicers still running.

‘Xanthus? Chosen?’

They must be on the upper level. The Sigillite’s papers are still spread out on the desk in a messy heap. Many pages and sheaves of notes have spilled onto the floor. That little bastard was always an untidy worker. She–

She stops. There, on the edge of one of the steel workstations. A single drop of blood. She stares at it. It’s just a fleck, but it’s fresh. It’s not a drip from a test flask. It was cast. *Flung*.

She looks around. She squats, and peers under the workstation. There are more spots on the deck, visible only when she rolls the chair aside.

She remains in her crouch, and turns slowly, cautiously scanning under the benches. From this low angle, she can see into the space under the tower stairs.

‘Oh shit,’ she murmurs.

Xanthus is sitting under the stairs with his back against the wall and his legs out in front of him. His head is bowed. He is holding his throat. She can see the blood coating his hand.

‘Xanthus? Where is he?’

He lolls as she tries to raise him. His hand falls away slackly and blood starts to squirt from a gash in his neck.

‘Shit! Shit! Shit!’

She lowers him to the deck, her hand compressing the bleed. She grabs his hand.

‘Xanthus! Wake up! Hold this! Hold it tight!’

He’s barely conscious, but she manages to force his hand to clamp the wound. She rushes to grab a medicae kit strapped to the wall, throwing it open and rummaging in it as she returns to him. A pool of bright blood has formed around his head and neck.

‘Xanthus, you damn fool,’ she growls. She moves his hand. Blood jets out of his neck weakly. She washes the wound with a squirt of counterseptic, gets a pseudoflesh patch in place, and bonds it to his skin with a thermal wand.

‘Xanthus–’

Her hands are soaked in blood. His eyelids flutter, and he exhales a slow moan.

‘Xanthus? Xanthus, wake up. Xanthus! Where is he?’

‘Attacked me…’ the Chosen whispers.

‘I can see that.’

‘Scalpel…’

‘Xanthus, where did he go?’

Xanthus opens his eyes. He's glazed with shock and confusion, only half-conscious.

'Where did the old bastard go?'

He mumbles something.

'Repeat!' she barks.

'Upstairs…' he murmurs.

She rises, and looks at the ceiling above her. She walks towards the stairs. She almost tells Xanthus to stay put, and then recognises the stupidity of the thought. He's not going anywhere.

She was not permitted to carry weapons inside the Palace precinct. She looks around, and picks up a retort stand from the bench. She hefts it to gauge its weight. Then she puts it down again and returns to Xanthus' prone form. She picks up the bloodstained thermal wand. It's just a medicae tool, but at its highest setting…

She turns the dial at the base of the handgrip to maximum. Then, clutching the wand like a dagger, she begins to edge her way up the stairs.

Three target clusters are moving into range on the south side of the concourse, and two more on the north. Amon resets the battery fields, prioritising the largest group, which an icon tag shows him is being led by an Astartes traitor. He directs two lascannon mounts to rake the formation, but specifically targets the Astartes with an Adrathic. Outside the glittering wall of the voids, the slaved weapons whir and realign on their servo-frames. The quad-cannons open up, each targeting the outer edges of the advancing group, then traversing slowly to chew across the ranks until their cones of fire overlap in the middle. Meanwhile, a scintillating beam from the needle Adrathic strikes the horned Astartes leading the Excertus. It seems to take a long time and a lot of energy to kill him.

Amon switches aim to other target tags. The battery mounts extend and rotate. He pours fire into the heavy smoke and rips through two more enemy fire-teams. Some of them try to run

for cover. But there is none on the wide concourse, and none of them make it.

In the meantime, two skirmish squads have advanced from the north side, running low in the open, trying to reach the flaring parapet of the bridge. Amon tasks two gun-mounts to tackle them, obliterating one in a blaze of heavy fire and driving the other into hasty retreat. By then, a third small group is approaching on the southern side. It won't be long before there are more target solutions than he has deployable mounts. At that point it will come down to speed of reaction and target priority.

He resets a battery to select the small southern group, and immediately detects a large body of contacts behind them. He tasks more batteries to establish a kill-box, while simultaneously directing a needle Adrathic to fix and eliminate a Traitor Astartes who has suddenly appeared in the centre of the plaza, approaching at a rapid pace. He glances back at the south-side targets and is about to commit when he sees the icon markers. The small, leading group is not reading as hostiles. He looks again, cueing the sensoria to verify, then leaves the console and strides to the end of the bridge to make a visual appraisal for himself.

He can just see them, through the swirling smoke. The larger group is a Hort Lupercali warband. It is pursuing the smaller group, harrying it with gunfire.

Amon watches for a second more. He expresses no emotion. He returns to the console, and quickly re-tasks the batteries, driving murderous bursts of fire into the Lupercali formation as best he can without risking injury to the smaller party.

They approach, stumbling out of the smoke-wash towards the head of the bridge. As soon as they are inside his angle of fire, Amon instructs the batteries to auto-target and rain shots at everything behind them. He watches the approaching figures, and gestures at them to hurry. Enemy fire clips and splashes into the voids. He waits until the very last moment, then disengages the void at the end of the bridge. Five figures dash

across the Pons Aegeus towards him. Stray shots streak in behind them, striking the face of the tower. As soon as the newcomers are on the span of the bridge, Amon reignites the void, closing the gap.

He steps back from the console and watches as they approach. He picks up his guardian spear. Even now, nothing is certain.

‘Sentinel Amon,’ says Ios Raja as he steps onto the promontory.

‘Hetaeron Companion Raja,’ Amon nods back. He has never seen the great Raja so mauled and damaged.

Behind Raja come a battered White Scar, the ghostly whispers of two Sisters of Silence, and a human male, who is panting and stumbling.

‘You have custody of the individual Basilio Fo?’ Raja asks.

‘Yes.’

‘And his device?’

‘Secured, empyrically modified and improved, and ready for deployment.’

‘Have you authorised deployment?’ Raja asks.

‘I have. This can be countermanded. Are you here to relieve me?’

Raja looks at the robed man nearby, bent double and out of breath. ‘He is,’ he says.

Hassan straightens up and looks at Amon, trying to control his breathing. His face is dirty with soot and there’s blood on him.

‘I bear the authority of the Sigillite Regent,’ he pants. ‘Raja will vouch for me. Apprise me.’

‘The weapon–’

‘I heard that part. You can confirm its function and modification?’

‘Fo has revised his work, Chosen One,’ Amon responds. ‘The sanction weapon can now be type-tailored to specific targets or target groups by gene-factor–’

‘And you were about to use it?’

‘In the circumstances, it was my only option,’ Amon responds.

‘Custodian,’ says Hassan quietly. ‘It’s a Tier XX weapon.’

‘I had to make a judgement based on duty function,’ replies Amon flatly.

‘I concur,’ says Raja. ‘In the circumstances, that would have been my directive. But circumstances have changed. We are here to effect extraction.’

They are shaken by a series of powerful explosions outside the shields. Amon and Raja immediately cross to the console. Sensoria are reading the first Traitor Astartes and armour units entering the concourse area. The corrupted icons show XVI Legion. Shells start to fall across the top of the concourse and the bridgehead, and bloom against the voids. A tone alarm indicates that an auto-battery has been disabled. Another shows a loss of shield integrity.

Raja turns to the White Scar, Ibelin Kumo, and the two Sisters of Silence.

‘Prepare,’ he says. ‘When the shields fall, we’ll be defending this bridge with our bare hands.’

‘You have an exit strategy?’ Amon asks the Chosen One.

‘He knows the tower better than we do,’ says Raja.

‘He can also speak for himself, Hetaeron,’ snaps Hassan. He clutches the old Komag assault weapon to his chest and looks at Amon. ‘I know the Retreat well. My access was extensive, and granted personally by the Sigillite. There is a private hangar deck concealed on the upper levels. The Sigillite’s personal ferry is always held there in readiness.’

‘Xanthus said nothing–’

‘Xanthus was not aware. Few of the Chosen are.’

‘You propose exfiltration by air?’ Amon asks. ‘That does not seem viable.’

‘We’ve done it once today already,’ says Hassan.

Amon gazes at him.

‘It did not, by the look of it, go well for you,’ he says.

‘This is not a debate, Custodian,’ Hassan growls.

‘Sir,’ says Amon, ‘perhaps it should be. If we attempt to move Fo and his weapon by air, there is a high percentage chance that we will be unsuccessful, and the weapon will be lost. If we deploy the weapon from here, we can guarantee its use and the consequence of that use.’

‘I said it wasn’t a debate, Custodian,’ says Hassan. ‘I have been ordered, by Lord Vulkan, who is now the senior figure of authority on Terra, and the de facto regent of the Imperium, to deliver the weapon to the Throne Room. That is my duty function. I am not in the habit of disobeying directives. Are you?’

‘I am not,’ says Amon.

There’s no sign of Fo on the upper level of the Sigillite’s laboratoria. The bio-structor vats murmur quietly in the chilly blue light. Andromeda-17 can hear the low grumble of the medical waste incinerators, and feel the faint heat they are kicking out.

She tightens her grip on the thermal wand.

‘Fo?’ she calls out. ‘There’s nowhere to go, and nowhere to hide.’

There’s no answer.

‘Fo?’

Nothing. Unless that was a thin peal of laughter from above. It’s hard to tell. The roar of warfare right outside has increased in pitch considerably, and the tower is vibrating slightly.

She crosses to the next flight of stairs. The floor above is gloomy, lights set low. She starts to ascend.

‘Fo? Listen to me. Don’t do this. If you attempt to escape, they’ll kill you. No question. I protected you. I helped keep you alive to get you this far. Fo? Don’t do this to me. I won’t pretend I liked you, but I believed in your work. In the importance of it. Just show yourself. Surrender.’

She stalks up another few steps.

‘Fo? You hear me? Give up. I can still keep you safe. I can convince them not to execute you, even over this. They need you. I’ll show them how much they need you.’

She reaches the top of the steps. The next floor is a private study area with an unmade daybed, and shelves lined with books and trinkets. It’s hard to make out details in the blue gloom. She can half-see an old chart, showing chakra focus points on a stylised human figure, a terracotta figurine of a goddess with spread wings and avian feet, and what appears to be a ceremonial aeldari mask. There are war-shields mounted on the walls, old trophies or mementos. The shields, scarred and faded, show the emblems of long-forgotten lasrifle brigades from the Unification Era, and the pack-marks of Thunder Warrior retinues. There are old swords and axes mounted in crossed pairs below each one.

‘Fo?’

‘They were always going to kill me, gene-witch. Always. That was always the end of this story.’

She glances around. Where is his voice coming from?

‘I can give the story a different ending,’ she says.

‘What ending, gene-witch? A lifetime of incarceration? Or, if I am able to renew myself, a lot of lifetimes? I don’t think so. I am tired of being a prisoner of those bastard Custodians. No. I’ve done what they asked me to do. I’m going to take my chances.’

In the gloom, the origin point of the voice seems to have shifted position. She turns slowly, warily, searching for any slight telltale of his location: a shadow, a scent, a flicker of motion, an echo of the voice.

‘You won’t get far, Fo. Not in this. How will you even get out of the tower?’

‘There’s a flyer, gene-witch. A secret hangar. It took a little finding, but it was mentioned in his journals. Which you kindly gave me access to.’

Again, the voice has moved. Was that a hint of motion? She moves around a side table, a displayed *Smilodon* skull on a stand. She skirts the wall.

‘Don’t do this, Fo,’ she calls. ‘You’ll die if you run. Let me help you. I can convince them of your usefulness. Perhaps allow you to be more than just a prisoner. I can be very persuasive.’

‘I know you can, gene-witch! You’re the only person I know, besides myself, who has managed to exert a persuasive effect on the Custodes. That non-linear ethical reasoning. It was superb, gene-witch. They are *so* cold and calculating. But even you have your limits, against the callous rationality of the Imperium. If the Selenar were really so effective, wouldn’t they still be a significant influence within the power structures of this culture? Promise all you like, there’s nothing you can give me.’

Now, she thinks, *I have a fix on his voice.* She is well aware of how dangerous he is, despite his appearance. She takes a step forwards. On the far wall, she sees the mounted shield of the Hort Africanus. A Unification era electrorapier is fixed beneath it. Its twin is missing. Empty brackets show where the crossed sword should hang.

‘Fo–’

She hears the faint rustle of a paper smock.

He’s behind her. In the darkness, he seems to be just a powered yellow blade and a devilish smile. The rapier thrusts

at her. She frantically twists to sidestep, and then manages to bring the wand up in time to deflect the second thrust. The thermal tip hisses as it strikes the charged blade.

She hears Fo curse as though stung. She leaps back. He comes at her. Another lunge. She drives the blade aside with the wand, but not before it scores the back of her hand. The pain is fierce.

She jerks backwards. In her haste, she collides with the daybed and almost overbalances. She hears Fo giggle.

The blade is slicing at her face.

‘Hold as long as you can and prepare to withdraw,’ Hassan orders, entering the Retreat through the portico. Heavy bombardment is now striking against the voids, which are sizzling as they absorb the kinetic and thermal force. Amon knows what imminent void failure looks like.

Raja orders Vigil Commander Ire and Knight-Centura Ridhi to either side of the bridge at the promontory end, and takes position at the bridgehead with the White Scar, Kumo. Everything is shaking and the noise is deafening. Beyond the coruscating shields, almost nothing is visible through a wall of black smoke, but Amon can see the icon markers on his console display. Hundreds of rune tags swarm the screen. Excertus units. Armoured groups. Sons of Horus. The Sigillite’s Retreat is a prize to be taken, especially as it seems to be defended.

Most of the rune icons are degraded and indecipherable. Amon can read one. Vorus Ikari. Captain of Fourth Company. One of the first-found’s most atrocious offspring.

Hassan rushes up the stairs.

‘Xanthus!’ he calls as he goes. ‘Prepare the prisoner for embarkation! Xanthus!’

He reaches the lower laboratoria level. Zaranchek Xanthus is sprawled on the floor, his neck and chest soaked in blood.

Hassan curses. He finds a weak pulse.

‘Xanthus? It’s Hassan. Where’s the prisoner? Where’s the Selenar?’

‘Upstairs,’ Xanthus gasps. ‘Upstairs…’

Hassan lowers his friend’s head back gently onto the deck then takes the stairs. The old combat drills come back to him, muscle memory. Clearance advance, his back against the curving tower wall, the weapon up and ready. He remembers to check the old weapon’s load counter. Thirty rounds remaining. He’s emptied half the mag already today. The Komag has kept him alive. But for Icaro’s parting gift, which seemed more symbolic than practical at the time, he would have been dead half a dozen times.

He maintains trigger discipline, index finger flat against the guard. He’s coming up into the genetic workshop. He hears a sound from the floor above.

Cornered by the Sigillite’s daybed, Andromeda-17 tries to turn. The slashing blade has just missed her head by a hair’s breadth. She parries the next thrust with the wand, but the device has no reach and it’s hardly made for duelling.

She can’t block the next thrust. The electrorapier goes in under her left collarbone and clean through her, the tip emerging above her shoulder blade. Transfixed, she sways. The pain is excruciating.

Grasping the grip, Fo sniggers. He cups his left palm around the rapier’s pommel, and jams it in a little harder.

Andromeda gags in pain. She can smell her blood burning in contact with the powered blade. She can’t pull herself off the sword.

So she pulls herself onto it, and rams the thermal wand into Fo’s cheek.

She misses. It goes into his right eye instead.

Fo shrieks in agony and staggers back, releasing his grip on the sword. Andromeda collapses. She manages to rise onto one knee, but the sword won’t come out of her.

‘That wasn’t very friendly,’ snarls Fo, one hand clamped over his ruined eye, smoke wisping between his gnarled fingers.

‘Screw you,’ she replies, pulling something out of her pocket. Fo doesn’t wait to see what it is. He has something of his own. A small stainless steel lab bottle with an aerosol diffuser. He sprays it in her face.

It wouldn’t pay to stand too close. The old man backs off quickly. Andromeda-17 topples to the floor, writhing and screaming.

Fo can’t help but watch. He has always been so proud of his creations. This one is a particularly nasty little bioengineered killer. A tailored sarcovore bacteria aggregate in a liquid gel suspension.

Her screams cease in seconds as her face and throat dissolve. The convulsive thrashing takes a little longer to die down. When the twitching stops, there’s very little of her left above the neck. Her flesh-eaten torso is oddly propped up on the tip of the rapier that’s still impaling her.

But even as she died, she was reaching for something, groping blindly. The thing she got out of her pocket. It’s right there on the floor, inches from her blistered hand.

Fo peers at it, grimacing in pain from his eye.

It’s a neurosynergetic alarm.

‘Oh, nearly,’ he says, grinning. Then he peers closer.

She had already pressed it.

Fo unleashes a stream of profanity. He turns and starts to run – half hobble, half scamper – towards the stairs. The hangar’s just two flights up.

He hears footsteps on the stairs below.

He loosens the cap of the lab bottle and bowls it towards the stairhead. Sadly, no opportunity to watch his handiwork this time. He runs for the stairs.

Hassan sees the bottle as it starts to bounce down the steps towards him. The scream he just heard was the most terrible sound. His finger's on the trigger–

But the metal flask, thumping down one step after another, is sloshing and splashing some noxious liquid wildly. He scrambles to get out of the way. He can't.

A hand grabs him. Hoists him. Hurls him.

He goes flying over the rail, out of the bottle's path, and lands hard on top of a bio-fab gene-vat in the lab space below. Bruised and winded, he sits up. He glimpses, for a millisecond, a blur of gold on the stairs.

The Sigillite's private ferry is old and ornate. Fo throws on the hangar deck's power, and opens the shutters. As they unfold, daylight spills in, followed by smoke from outside. He hobbles to the craft's ramp in his tatty paper suit. He had one very much like this, back in the day. Integral void and cloak systems, auto-guidance. How far will it get him?

He turns. Amon has arrived without a sound.

'Ah. That *was* fast,' he says.

The Custodian's golden greaves are smouldering slightly, and discoloured. Fo smiles sadly. Custodes physiology is still a mystery to him. The sarcovore he has spent a good deal of his precious lab-time creating is nothing like effective enough when it comes to them.

'Oh well!' he chuckles. He raises his hands. 'You've got me, Amon. I tried my best, but you got me.'

Amon does not reply.

'Well, Amon, I submit to your custodianship once again.'

'You have attempted to escape. You have demonstrated your intent to defy the Imperium and subvert its interests. You are an enemy of the Throne.'

Fo bursts out laughing.

‘So what is this, then? My postponed execution? The ending of another blood game? Have you come to kill me?’

‘Inevitably,’ says Amon, and stakes him to the side of the ferry with his guardian spear. It happens so fast, Fo doesn’t have time to flinch.

He gapes. He looks down at the blade impaling him with his remaining eye. Blood suddenly streams out of his mouth.

Basilio Fo dies with a look on his face that could be surprise, or disappointment.

Or perhaps some weird kind of satisfaction.

9:xv

Only in death

A light but steady rain falls in the Throne Room. The heat radiating from the Throne's burning light is now so intense that the gold inlay of the high ceiling is melting. Drops of liquid gold fall like rain, splash on the sectile floor, and quiver like beads of quicksilver.

The great chamber is almost empty now. The last of the psycho-able tithed to support Malcador's struggle have been used up, engulfed, consumed. Their burned and smoking bones, and discarded caskets, litter the nave. The Throne Room has become a charnel house.

There are no more coming. No more to be gathered and brought in. All the doors have been sealed. The Unspoken Sanction is done. It wasn't enough. Vulkan only consented to it as a last recourse by telling himself that his guilt and disgust would be outweighed by the necessity. An extreme measure for an extreme moment, a sacrifice to keep the Imperium alive.

But no, it has fallen short. The moment has not passed. All that suffering and death has not seen them through, and now seems a hideous crime in its futility and failure. The end has not justified the means.

Molten gold drips from the ceiling. Where the drops strike the floor, they tap and percuss, like the tick of the clocks that no longer run, beating out the time that doesn't pass, marking out the lingering agony of the endless now.

Without the Sanction to reinforce it, the Throne blazes out of control. It expels heat and blinding light as though a volcanic vent has opened in the floor of the chamber to spew its wrath. The last surviving adepts of the Concillium still tend their ailing and overwhelmed machineries, but Vulkan is quite sure that they are not achieving anything. Indeed, he fears that their

minds are so baked, they are simply repeating meaningless duties by rote, for no reason and to no effect.

For the most part, the multitude of people who had gathered here – the nobility, the staff, the courtiers – have fled, for there is no sanctuary. He has no idea where they have gone, for there is no sanctuary anywhere else either. He fears the atrocity of the Unspoken Sanction drove them away in revulsion and terror, into the arms of death waiting outside the room.

He walks towards the great Silver Door.

Human ash drifts in the air. The wide floor trembles under his feet. In places, the tiles have buckled and cracked, skewed by the splitting bedrock beneath. He sees that long cracks have fissured the massive columns of ouslite and marble. The very bones of the room are giving up, the bones of the Palace which seemed unbreakable, the bones of Terra itself, the stuff of Earth, those solid and enduring elements that are his dominion and which always seemed to share his permanence.

The great cry, the war cry that resounded just hours or seconds ago – he can no longer tell, despite the clock-tick of the golden drops – has not been answered or repeated. If it was the mark of their last hope, a final rallying cry against the darkness, then it is forlorn, and their last hope is dashed.

Everything is done. Everything is undone.

At the door, Hetaeron Proconsul Uzkarel Ophite and Sentinel-Companion Dolo Lamora wait with their Sentinels Pylorus, weapons drawn. The Silver Door is barred. The Custodes do not need to tell him how close the enemy is. Vulkan can hear the savage, last-ditch fighting in the passageways outside. So close. The enemy is at the door.

He will not let them enter.

He sighs.

A futile claim. He will not be able to stop them getting in. Some, certainly. Many, perhaps. But he cannot stop them all, for the hosts of Chaos are without number or end.

Rather, he must ensure that their efforts are in vain. They must, at their moment of triumph, share the futility that he has known since he was placed in command of the last acres of the Imperium.

They will force entry, but there will be nothing left for them to enter.

There is no time left to measure, and no time left. By the steady tick of liquid gold, his only count, he will set his moment. To the beat of that alchemy, he will perform his own.

The maker must unmake. The Talisman awaits him.

He turns from the door. He has made his decision.

Now is the time. Now is the end. Now is the death.

9:xvi

Masters of Mankind

The Emperor falls.

The polluted energies that transfix Him make His armour plates translucent and reveal the spectral shadows of His shuddering skeleton.

Caecaltus Dusk, through his neurosynergetic rapport, shares his lord's pain, but even without that bond, he would be riven with anguish. The sight of it. The King-of-Ages fallen. The King-of-Ages struck down and mutilated by the hand of His own son.

Horus Lupercal advances on his helpless prey. It is not a first blow he has struck. It is a first *and* last. The infernal energies that he unleashed to strike his father to the ground continue to sear from his outstretched hand, a snaking ribbon of black light that arcs from son to father and pins the Master of Mankind to the floor in death-agony.

The *former* Master of Mankind.

The stream of chaogenous power is relentless. It lashes like a lazy whip of lightning from the first-found's right palm, flexing and flailing, and burns into the Emperor's breastplate, igniting Him internally, crushing Him into the cold black flagstones, and destroying Him atom by atom.

The gods approve. In the theatral galleries of the Court, the Old Four watch and chuckle.

The Emperor cannot move. He is pinned by slow, incinerating death. He refuses to scream or voice His pain. He will not give Horus that satisfaction. But He cannot move, except to writhe and spasm.

He *cannot move*.

But Caecaltus can. Fuelled by pain, and rage, and desperation, the proconsul breaks from his trance and hurls himself at Horus. His bolter shells, blasting from the mount of his paragon spear, reach Horus first, detonating against the first-found's thigh and hip. The weapon's blade, swung in an expert address, strikes an instant later.

Horus turns, surprised by the Hetaeron's assault. Caecaltus hacks and thrusts, driving his spear against the Serpent's Scales. Horus shifts his maul to smash his attacker aside. He continues to pour energy into his father's body. He has not finished. He will *not* be interrupted.

Then *Mourn-It-All* bites. Leetu comes at the first-found from another angle, adding his borrowed blade to the proconsul's valiant efforts. Horus roars. His rage shakes the psychofractal darkness of the Court. Still he burns power down into his father.

Then Rubio's sword, star-bright with the Emperor's will, slices into him too. Loken does not hesitate. His gauntlets still red with the Angel's blood, he slashes the blade at his father's plate. Every blow a killing blow. Every blow a lethal strike.

Every blow, raining at the Warmaster from each one of the three, would be a conquering blow on any other day, the stroke of a master warrior that would fell and slay any opponent.

Except this opponent is past slaying. He is deathless and unkillable. The undivided power of Chaos has inured him against mortal harm.

And that which does not kill him simply makes him angry.

Still the three blades land, a furious onslaught that cracks scales and scores plate. It is not the damage that bothers Horus, nor the wounds. The wounds are nothing to him. It is not the razor edge of the paragon spear, nor the shearing force of *Mourn-It-All*, nor even the scalding kiss of Rubio's sword.

It is the sight of his own son turned against him.

Garviel, Garviel…

No compunction. No reserve. No restraint. No respect for paternity or bloodline, or a love once given and returned. Loken has come against him, with a look in his cold, grey eyes that Horus knows of old, a look that means he has no other purpose than killing. It is a look that all Loken's enemies down the years have seen. Briefly. *Once*.

Horus never thought to be fixed by that look. It seems to hurt him more than anything the gods have ever done to him.

And the gods, the Old Four, in their shrouded abditory, stir and crane forwards. They observe hungrily. Fathers and sons… Agnate loyalties, such complex connections, always provide the most exquisite sport.

Horus roars again. The malign energies streaming from his claw cease, his prey forgotten.

He turns on Loken.

Now it is Loken's turn to see and feel the look. The focused, bloodlight glare of Warmaster Lupercal, that has illuminated worlds and torn empires down. Those eyes of terror…

'Do it!' Loken spits. 'Prove to me what you have become!'

Horus needs no urging. He has no compunction either. His claws open to turn the power upon his son, and punish the insolence of an ungrateful child.

The lightning comes. Loken does not flinch. But Leetu moves, smashing Loken out of its path. And Caecaltus moves, driving his spear-blade against the Talon to turn the blast aside.

The arc of power goes wide. It scorches Loken and Leetu as it passes over them, and scalds their flesh inside their plate. It blasts a deep and molten trench in the floor of the Court. The infinite architecture of the Warmaster's sanctum shivers and shifts to repair its sepulchre-black form.

Horus thrusts forwards. Caecaltus strikes him again, from the right. The Warmaster smashes him aside without a second look, intent upon his son. The proconsul tumbles away, a

discarded toy, praesidium shield shattered and Aquilon plate torn.

Loken gets to his feet as Leetu finds his. He turns to face his father. The Warmaster is an onrushing avalanche of darkness. The claws rise. Power wells to roast his son to cinders. The baleful lightning arcs out and envelops Loken and Leetu both.

They do not die. They stand, bemused, as the hate and power, black as Old Night and threaded with warpflux, crackles around them with an absolute vehemence, yet held at bay.

Horus lowers his hand, and the lightning stops.

He turns.

The Emperor lowers *His* hand, dissolving the mind-shield that prevented the immolation of His two warriors. He is standing. His golden breastplate is scorched black, and His cloak is charred. Blood runs slowly from His nose and the corner of His lip. His war-sword rises in His hand, and an asterism of white light flares like a rising sun behind His crowned head.

He moves towards His son with the lustral wrath of a supernova. Horus comes to meet Him with the atrocifying hunger of a black hole.

They clash, each landing blows simultaneously. The ignescent collision shakes the world. Chunks of black marble and broken buttress rain down from the quaked ceiling. Fractal surfaces break and shatter like porcelain. The high windows of the Court blow out in showers of coloured glassaic, letting in the red glow of the warp and permitting a giddying view of Terra, blistered and enflamed below.

The Old Four squeal in alarm, and then applaud. Father and son.

This is between them now.

9:xvii

Worse places

The sky is broken. The ground too.

Constantin stirs. He feels wind on his face, and broken bones grating inside him. He has landed on a stretch of scrubby heath. The ruined hulk of the orbital plate looms, less than half a kilometre away.

He was falling into the sky. The warp has inverted nature again, and brought him crashing down. He doesn't know if he can stand.

The sky is in turmoil. Some elemental maelstrom is forming beyond the orbital plate where the ever-darkening cloud cover is draining into the spinning whirlpool of a hurricane. Flecks of lightning dart from its eye like las-fire. The wind is picking up.

He hears voices.

Diocletian Coros and the last four members of his Companion company are making their way towards him, calling his name. *Forget me,* he thinks. *Just fight the bastards.*

Coros reaches him.

'Get up,' he says.

'Not sure I can, tribune,' he replies.

'Not pertinent, captain-general,' Coros says. 'Get up. They're coming. They intend to finish it.'

Constantin gazes past him. He can see black shapes descending from the upper part of the orbital plate. They are floating gently, like the scattered feathers of a crow, carried by the air down the metal cliff.

No, not the air, he thinks. The warp. Abaddon and his bastard sons are carried by the warp.

They begin to land, as gently as snow. Abaddon and his praetors, his battle-brothers. Whole squads, a company strength or more, settling to the ground and then walking forwards. Constantin sees them, the best and the worst of them: Zeletsis, Baraxa, Jeraddon, Kucher, Curalis, Varia, Gustus, Sycar. So very many, and among them, once again, Lorgar's venomous spawn Erebus. Well, no wonder, Constantin thinks. This warp magic is his. This is all his doing.

It was *always* his doing.

Abaddon's force is approaching, spreading out, almost leisurely in its advance. Squads of Word Bearers are emerging from the orbital plate to reinforce them.

Hardly necessary. The Sons will be more than enough, with Erebus' power behind them. They have Valdor and his men in the open, broken and reduced to almost nothing. Hellas Sycar and his Justaerin lead the traitor formations. It will be decided quickly. It will be over soon.

Constantin shakes his head wearily, and even that hurts. Though it will be quick, he won't make it easy.

'Give me that,' he tells Coros. He points to his spear, which is lying nearby in the grass. The shaft is now very slightly bent.

Coros brings it to him. Constantin grips it, and uses it as a support to haul himself to his feet. Like an old man with a stick, he thinks.

He stands, unsteady, swollen with pain.

'Form up,' he tells his men. Simple words now, no neurosynergetics. 'We'll hand them hell.'

They answer as one.

Constantin glances at Coros.

‘If we get out of this,’ he says, ‘you or me, any of us… That storm. That’s where we go.’

He points at the rotating spiral of clouds beyond the orbital plate. It’s dragging the sky in from all sides as it turns, like a tablecloth being twisted and pulled into a hole.

‘I think that’s what we’ve been making for. I think that’s where He is.’

Coros nods.

‘Any of us, you hear?’ Constantin says, addressing them all. ‘If you clear the field, make for that.’

As though to prove his point, thunder splits the air, rolling from the eye of the storm. It rumbles and booms, like the sound of twin giants clashing.

‘But this first,’ Constantin says. He points with his spear. The XVI are approaching. Bolters start to crack. Valdor steps forward, circles the spear and deflects two of the whining shells. They explode as they glance aside. He wants them to know he’s ready. They are not coming on a wounded quarry, helpless and injured. He wants them to understand he’s going to hurt them.

The hurt begins.

Valdor and his men step into the Justaerin as they arrive. The clash is instant and violent, a trading of blows and a shredding of metal. They’re brutes, beasts, but beasts can be made to yowl.

‘Gir Kucher,’ Constantin growls, as blood sprays from his spear-tip.

More of the XVI are closing, Word Bearers too. A pack, a mob, clotting together and slowly surrounding the loyalists, encircling them just as the rushing clouds encircle the eye of that tempest. The intensity of the combat is ferocious, just as last stands ought to be.

The last stand of all.

Something breaks into the swarming ring of traitors, hacking a brutal path through their mass. Valdor hears a raging voice.

'To your glory and the glory of Him on Terra!'

'Damn them to hell!' Constantin shouts to his men above the uproar of combat. 'The Seventh is with us! Dorn is with us!'

And he is. Rogal Dorn, defiant and unyielding. Praetorian, primarch of the Imperial Fists, seventh-found son. There are no Imperial Fists with him, no battle-brothers, no armies. Just Dorn and his sword and his clear, strong voice, hacking a bloody trail through the enemy like some spirit of vengeance as he pitches into the fray.

They meet in the thick of it, back to back, slicing and rending at the raging menace around them.

'You come alone?' Valdor yells.

'To my regret!'

'You join us just to die, Praetorian!'

'There are worse places to fall!' Dorn roars.

Dorn is a huge figure in gold, his powerblade hissing with fried blood. He has no magic, no command over the warp, no proof against its workings, but yet the traducing Sons of Horus seem to recoil from him. They are cowed by his ungoverned mettle, his temper, his skill as a warrior unleashed at last.

His courage.

They shrink from his courage. From Valdor's courage. From the bravery of Coros and the others. They don't understand it. It has no property, no intrinsic power, no force of itself, but oh, how it punishes them.

Dorn demolishes Phaeto Zeletsis. He cleaves the notorious praetor open and fillets him with a blue flash of his shrieking blade. He guts Zeto Curalis. Valdor spears Lael Gustus and levers the Justaerin's corpse aside. Coros breaks Besh Varia's spine and removes his head.

'Abaddon!' Valdor yells. 'Get to Abaddon!'

‘I know!’ Dorn shouts back.

They can see the First Captain, pushing in through the swarm to reach them. Yet even courage has its limits. The melee is too dense, a compression of thrashing bodies, fragments of broken armour spinning into the air, jets of arterial blood from severed joints and the stumps of necks.

So much blood. The smell of it on the wind, the haze of it on the air. A scent of blood that predators can detect from miles away.

The predators come, theroid and baying.

Some come running, like wolves chasing down their prey. Others swoop, wings wide, as hawks upon a kill. They rip, without order or unifying plan or formation, into the rear of the traitor mass, and commence their slaughter. Their teeth are sharp, their eyes burned black with madness. Their armour is as red as the blood that has drawn them here, as red as the thirst that drives them, feral, into the battle.

Taerwelt Ikasati.

Meshol. Sarodon Sacre.

Maheldaron. Khoradal Furio.

Raldoron.

Fifty more, besides. Battle-brothers. Sanguinary Guards. Terminators.

The Blood Angels of Anabasis company, in their divine insanity.

The battle structure wheels, breaks, devolves in seconds from mass brawl to individual murder and bloodletting.

Abaddon turns in the press, astounded by the onslaught coming at his back. This isn’t the battle courage displayed by Dorn and Valdor, this is utter frenzy, an energumenical death-lust. He hacks one Blood Angel in two, then rams his blade through Maheldaron, but the Blood Angel doesn’t die. He keeps fighting, tearing at Abaddon despite the sword wedged

through his torso. Erebus crushes Maheldaron's skull with his maul and drags Abaddon clear.

'Turn them back!' Abaddon snarls.

'Ezekyle–'

'Do it!'

'They are not listening!' Erebus shouts. 'They are not hearing!'

The heath below the orbital plate has become a riot of slaughter. It is no longer any kind of battle as recognised in the principles of Astartesian combat. It is a pandemonium of execution and survival, a frenzy of predation and preservation, completely lawless and shorn of any rule or code or ethic.

In the name of the Throne, Constantin thinks, *the Blood Angels! Whose side are they on? What has become of them?*

The conflict increases in pitch. It becomes impossible to judge which side will prevail, or if anything will be left alive by the time it ends.

The gathering storm of neverness decides the outcome. In the course of the clash, it has increased in force, frothing to a cataclysmic level of power. The sky is black, or else has been torn away, leaving nothing but the supernal void behind. The tempest bursts. Gale winds course across the landscape like a shockwave. A thousand forks of lightning strike the ground like an indiscriminate artillery barrage. Sections of the orbital plate collapse or fly clear as the lethiferous winds comb through it. The ground heaves, quakes, ruptures and splits, hurling traitors and loyalists alike into the air.

Dorn grabs Valdor by the arm and hauls him back to his feet. Soil and debris is raining down, and the wind batters them.

'The storm–!' he cries.

'I know!' Valdor yells back.

'Come on! While there is a chance!'

Together, they run into the deluge.

9:xviii

Some kind of sanctuary

‘So many civilians,’ Tragan comments.

‘As many as we could bring,’ replies Sigismund. ‘As many as would follow.’

They stare down through the grille of the metal walkway at the pilgrim files passing below them, an unending stream pouring from the Septenary Portal down the square-cut access tunnel into the interior chambers of the site. More than three thousand have passed by already, six or seven abreast, and the vast tail of the pilgrim column tracks away down the gorge outside and out across the copper plains. The Seconds, and Tragan’s postern guards, are herding them in as fast as they can.

‘They are from the Palace?’ Tragan asks.

‘They are the Palace,’ says Sigismund. ‘They are the city-habs and the Dominions. They are all that remains of it, all that matters. We seek only sanctuary.’

‘Well, we have space enough,’ the Dark Angel replies. ‘A mountain’s worth. But there is no sanctuary here, brother.’

‘The Death Guard?’ Sigismund asks.

‘The Pale King’s devils besiege us,’ says a voice. They turn as Corswain approaches along the walkway. His eyes are narrowed, sceptical. His fine wargear is mackled with blood and mire.

Tragan bows his head. Sigismund nods respectfully.

‘Lord seneschal,’ says Sigismund.

‘Lord Champion,’ Corswain returns.

They look each other in the eye.

‘An odd happenstance,’ Corswain remarks.

‘Odd indeed. No deliberation or compass brought us here.’

‘And to the seventh portal, yet,’ Corswain replies. ‘A numeral particular to your Legion.’

‘Indeed,’ says Sigismund. ‘I noted the fact.’ He can tell the Hound of Caliban is beyond wary. He trusts nothing and no one outside his own. Nor, thinks Sigismund, has he any reason to. ‘What can I say, my lord?’ Sigismund asks. ‘What can I do? I want to secure your good faith.’

‘Faith, Sigismund?’

‘Trust, then.’

‘Do we not show it?’ Corswain asks, glancing at the silent procession passing below. ‘We open our door, even though the storm assails us. We let you in.’

He pauses. He watches the filthy tide of pilgrims.

‘They make no sound,’ he says quietly. ‘They make no complaint.’

‘They are past fear, lord.’

‘Nor do they weep.’ Corswain looks back at Sigismund. ‘No lamentation, despite all you report they have been through.’

‘They are past that too,’ says Sigismund. ‘This shelter is a miracle to them.’

‘A cold miracle,’ says Corswain. ‘There is no comfort here. No provision. An empty mountain, nothing more.’

‘And the Death Guard assails you?’

‘For days now, relentless. Typhus and his marshalled host, an insect swarm inflamed by witch-blood magick. His trickery has been foul, and his deceits have been many. We have barely kept our heads, or the minds within them.’

‘No wonder then you regard us with suspicion,’ replies Sigismund. ‘I have seen their rancid sorcery for myself.’

‘You have contested them?’

‘Indeed. The companies of Skulidas Gehrerg.’

‘That vermin?’

‘The Cadaver Lord.’

‘One of Typhus’ chieftains,’ Corswain mutters.

‘We clashed with them on the desert plain beyond the gorge.’

‘There is no desert beyond the gorge,’ says Corswain.

‘There is now, lord seneschal,’ says Sigismund.

‘How so?’

Sigismund shrugs. ‘I know not. I care not. The world is broken and reshaped by the warp. All I know is, Gehrerg is dead, by my hand.’

‘You killed him, Champion?’ Corswain asks, his gaze quizzical. He looks aside at Tragan. ‘One less to bother us.’

‘I will kill more, Hound of Caliban,’ says Sigismund. ‘I will kill as many as you permit, unless it robs the First of honour. What few men I have with me, I will pledge to your side.’

‘Yes, so few,’ says Corswain. ‘A multitude comes to us, yet not to relieve our travails. So very many, and yet so few of them warriors.’

He sighs. He seems exhausted.

‘You slew the Cadaver Lord?’ he asks Sigismund.

‘I did, seneschal. Face to face.’

‘With this hand?’ Corswain asks, gesturing at Sigismund’s chain-wrapped right fist.

‘With this hand, lord.’

‘Then let me take it,’ Corswain says. He holds out his hand and they clasp. ‘I need your sword, Sigismund, and the swords of your men, however few they are. In return, you get my trust, and what sanctuary I can offer to the Emperor’s people.’

He looks to Tragan.

‘Bring them in, Tragan,’ he orders. ‘All of them, as fast as you may, even if we fill this empty hill to bursting point with their numbers. Sigismund? Walk with me.’

They follow the walkway into the borehole tunnels of the mountain, and thread their way along the dim passages where water drips and deep cold settles. Even from a distance, they can hear the steady tramp of the pilgrims shuffling into the lower chambers in ever-increasing numbers.

‘The Destroyer assaults come in waves,’ Corswain says as they walk. ‘It has been an hour since their last assault, but they come steadily, like the tides. Sometimes a dozen in quick succession.’

‘An hour, you say?’ asks Sigismund.

Corswain shrugs.

‘A guess only,’ he admits. ‘Their focus from the start has been the pass leading to the Tertiary Portal, our weakest defence. They have been relentless there. I wonder if Gehrerg’s companies had been despatched to find a second point of attack. Or to block your advance.’

‘Or they had as little idea where they were as we did,’ replies Sigismund.

‘Is the world really so twisted out of joint?’ asks Corswain.

Sigismund nods.

‘And it changes constantly,’ he says. ‘Like water, like clay. Moulding and remoulding at the whim of the warp.’

‘Well, this mountain remains unchanging,’ says Corswain. ‘As set and immutable as the ages.’

‘You retook it?’

‘By drop assault, from the hands of daemons. We hoped to light its beacon to guide salvation here.’

‘But it remains unlit?’

‘Quite broken,’ says Corswain bitterly, ‘its apparatus destroyed. I doubt it will ever shine again. I fear, friend, I took ten thousand warriors and wasted them on a foolish gamble.’

‘What else could you have done?’

‘Made for the heart of the Palace,’ Corswain answers, imagining it. ‘A fast assault to break the siege.’

‘I fear you have no comprehension of the magnitude of the enemy’s numbers,’ says Sigismund. ‘If you had taken that course, you would be dead by now.’

‘Dead maybe,’ says Corswain, ‘but with a sense of accomplishment.’

They walk on in silence.

‘And you?’ Corswain asks. ‘You leave the line, and the heart of battle, to shepherd civilians?’

‘I never left the line,’ replies Sigismund. ‘I am the line.’

The boldness of his remark makes the Hound of Caliban laugh, and the sound of it rolls in echoes down the stone tunnel.

‘The truth is,’ says Sigismund, ‘they found me. And the Emperor bade me lead them from the ruins.’

‘He spoke to you?’ Corswain asks, eyes bright.

‘In His way. By means that could not be denied.’

‘He does not speak to me,’ Corswain responds.

‘He will,’ says Sigismund. ‘Besides, lord, what is the Imperium but the people who compose it? Who are we fighting for, if not them? To safeguard the people is to safeguard the Imperium, and to protect that is to protect the Emperor Himself. Our citizens are the body of the Emperor.’

They climb steep granite steps and emerge into the open on the highest fighting platforms of the Tertiary Portal. It is bitter cold. Ash-snow and black rain fall in equal measure. Sigismund strains to see the towering black slopes of the

Hollow Mountain, its summit lost in banks of snow-cloud and slate haze.

Adophel approaches, and Sigismund greets him, then waits as Corswain, in terse and broad terms, recounts to his Chapter Master the unlikely events at the Septenary Portal. Adophel's brow furrows in cynical disbelief. More trust to be earned. More trust from all of them. Sigismund sees the squadrons, orders and gun-shields of Dark Angels cowled and huddled along the ramparts, resting in the frozen wind as they watch the pass and wait for renewed attack. Many cast questioning glances his way.

He ignores them, and walks down to the lip of the platform. He stares out at the steep black pass instead. A bad place for a fight. Too tight, too choked. It should be easy to hold. How did the traitors even reach the fighting levels? The cliffs are sheer, and sheened with rain and ice.

He muses. Is this the same pass he entered from the copper desert, or another route of approach? How can it be? It looks the same, and yet not the same at all. He stepped into the Septenary Portal out of baking desert heat, and here it is winter. Unless…

Unless magick. The warp. The ring of trickery with which, Corswain said, dread Typhus had encircled and cursed this hollow peak.

He ignores the thought and its implications. All that matters is the now, the next step. To be present in the moment is all he needs to do.

Adophel appears beside him. 'Some tale,' he remarks.

Sigismund ignores the jibe.

'I'll find places for your men,' Adophel says. 'Positions on the platforms. They must keep to them. We are spread thin. Every man must know his place and hold it, and be ready to move if commanded. Will they do that?'

'This is your scheme of repulse to run, Chapter Master,' Sigismund replies. 'They will do exactly as you tell them.'

‘Are you sure?’

‘They wouldn’t remain in my company of Seconds if they didn’t know what to do with an order.’

Adophel nods. ‘I hear you have human marksmen,’ he says. ‘How much ammunition do they have left? And what–’

‘How do they scale the cliffs, Adophel?’ Sigismund asks.

‘What?’

‘The Death Guard. The cliffs are sheer and treacherous. How do they scale the cliffs?’

Adophel grins at him. It is an ugly smile.

‘They climb like spiders, Champion,’ he says. ‘They climb like daemon spiders.’

‘And wait like them,’ Sigismund muses. ‘Wait in silence, in their crevices and nooks, and then pounce. Do you smell that?’

‘What now?’ asks Adophel.

‘They’re coming again,’ says Sigismund.

Adophel stares out into the pitch shadows of the gorge. He sniffs the wind.

‘Damn you, you’re right.’

‘What is your business here?’ asks the warrior in the mask. His voice seems to hold all the echoes of the mountain chamber, and they do not hide his disapproval.

‘Shelter,’ says Keeler. Pilgrims file past them on both sides, casting frightened glances at the masked Dark Angel.

‘I wasn’t informed,’ he says. ‘Lord Seneschal Corswain–’

‘Can’t be everywhere, I imagine,’ she replies. ‘We are no threat. These are refugees from the Palace. They need a place to stop. A place to hide. Nothing more.’

‘These chambers are in use, all of them,’ the Dark Angel replies. ‘These… people will interfere with my work. Their presence–’

‘Your work is to remake this beacon?’ she asks. ‘To restore the Astronomican? You are of the Librarius, then?’

‘I am Cypher,’ he says.

‘I am Keeler,’ she responds, staring up at him.

‘Means nothing,’ he replies.

‘While “cipher” means… everything? Anything?’ she asks.

‘I care not for your tone,’ he snaps.

‘I care not for your indifference,’ she says.

Three more Dark Angels have approached them.

‘We cannot work around this,’ Tanderion complains to Cypher. ‘This rabble is filling the sub-chambers, and there is no end to them.’

‘They are dampening the acoustics,’ says Asradael. ‘The sheer mass of them is altering the resonance from this level to the upper circle. And as we recalibrate, more flock in, and so the resonance shifts again–’

‘They need a place to shelter,’ Keeler snaps.

Asradael glances at her. His face is oddly burned.

‘And food?’ he asks. ‘And water? What will they eat?’

‘Each other?’ suggests Tanderion.

‘Silence,’ says Cypher. ‘Keeler – *Keeler*? Keeler, I am not unmoved by the plight of these pour souls, but this mountain is an instrument. A mechanism. It is not a bunker or a hab basement. My brothers and I have worked for hours–’

‘Days,’ says Cartheus.

‘Whatever time has passed,’ says Cypher, ‘we have laboured to restore function here. It is a delicate and subtle process, and hazardous in the extreme, as Asradael’s scars attest. And now, this influx disturbs everything we have so far achieved.’

‘I’m sorry,’ she replies.

‘We are Librarius,’ says Cypher, ‘as you remark. The five of us have many subtle arts at our–’

‘Five?’ she asks.

‘Our brother Zahariel is at work below,’ says Tanderion.

‘We have certain gifts,’ Cypher tells Keeler, ‘but the mechanism of the mountain is unfamiliar to us, and we are learning as we go. You must take these people away and let us work.’

‘They will go where they please,’ says Keeler. ‘I have no command over them. I could sooner dam a river or turn a glacier.’

‘No, they clearly follow you,’ says Cartheus, peering at her. ‘I can see it in you. Like a banner…’

‘What are you?’ Asradael asks.

‘I am Keeler,’ she replies. ‘Simply that… nothing more. A devoted servant of the Emperor of Mankind. Just as you are. But… Wait, please.’

She turns and beckons to Eild. When he comes over, she whispers to him. He returns in short order, steadying Zhi-Meng with his arm.

‘Who are these minds, Euphrati?’ the old man asks as she takes his hand.

‘Angels, sir,’ she replies. ‘Angels of the First.’ She looks at Cypher. ‘This is Nemo Zhi-Meng,’ she says.

‘I’m delighted,’ replies Cypher, without emotion.

‘Lord Zhi-Meng,’ she repeats. ‘One of the Senior Twelve of the High Council.’

‘Then I am also honoured,’ Cypher shrugs.

‘He is choirmaster of the Astra Telepathica,’ she says.

Cypher hesitates.

‘My word, Euphrati,’ Zhi-Meng says, tilting his blind head. ‘You have impressed him. His mind races!’

‘You will not look there,’ Cypher warns sharply.

‘My lord Zhi-Meng always abides by the protocols of psykanic privacy, sir,’ says Keeler. ‘He will not violate the intimacy of your mind. Will you, Nemo?’

‘Of course not, Euphrati,’ says Zhi-Meng. He turns his sightless eyes towards Cypher. ‘I would not cause offence, or disrespect your psychic space, my lord Cypher.’

‘I am quite sure,’ says Keeler, ‘that Lord Zhi-Meng has a great deal of knowledge regarding the workings of the Astronomican. Knowledge he will gladly share with you and your brothers and so assist your labours of repair.’

‘I have,’ says Zhi-Meng. ‘I will.’

The Dark Angels glance at each other.

‘I’m sure he does,’ says Cypher. He clears his throat. ‘And we will gladly accept that help.’

‘Come, my lord,’ says Cartheus, reaching out a hand to the old man. ‘Let me find you a beaker of water, and a place to sit.’

They lead him away. Cypher looks at Keeler.

‘Did you know his usefulness when you brought him here?’ he asks.

‘I didn’t even know I was coming here,’ she replies.

The voice of Typhus is roaring down the pass. The storm comes first, then the blizzard, then the rain and the flies.

Then the Death Guard spring from their lochetic stillness and assault the cliffs.

‘Blind Spur!’ Adophel yells above the roar of assault. ‘Corpse Slope! Gateway Cliff! Falchion Ridge!’

The Angels of the First scramble to positions. Lances clatter as they are angled down through bulwark slits. Choke nets unfurl. The first support guns begin to bark and spit.

Sigismund watches for a second. Death Guard, preceded by a carious stink, are advancing storm-swift. Their dark ranks are forming lunate and blade-edge formations, as though upon a flat field of war, but they are ascending the cliffs like swarming insects, without scaling ladders or siege frames. Some have ropes and grapples, but most do not. They ascend the vertical in howling packs, armour gleaming like ox-hide and beetle-carapace in the streaming rain and bruised light.

Like spiders. Like spiders, Adophel said. He was right. They are moving as one, like an ocean wave, crawling over everything, mocking logic.

'Where do you want me?' Sigismund shouts. His Seconds have not yet been led up from the mountain below, let alone set in place.

'With me, then!' Adophel yells back.

They reach a fighting platform on the lower tiers – *Falchion Ridge*, it would seem – as the Destroyers begin to spill over the rail. Sigismund, pausing only to offer a salute with his black sword, pitches in beside Adophel and four other Angels of the First. He kills a traitor with his first strike, dropping the corpse onto the platform, then reaches the rail and sends two more tumbling backwards into the darkness below with a single cross-stroke that rips their breastplates open like mouths.

He kicks away a grapple-hook that has lodged in the lip of the platform, then leans over and stabs down into the head of a traitor who has just drawn level with the platform deck. The tip of the black sword goes deep through helmet, skull, brain and throat. The traitor goes limp, and falls back into the abyss, but Sigismund's blade is wedged tight in ceramite and bone, and is pulled away with him. The chain snaps tight around his wrist. Sigismund hauls on it, straining, and the blade dislodges. The Destroyer drops like a fish unhooked from a line. Sigismund drags his blade back up, seizes the grip, and has just enough time to twist and skewer a traitor scrambling up to his left. The Chapter Master is braced to his right,

lopping heads and limbs with a notched war-axe. Beyond him, a son of the Lion swings a shrilling chainsword to saw hands and bodies off the rail.

The combat is gruelling. The defenders are fixed on one plane, trying to angle their blows towards another. The Death Guard, in contrast, seem entirely liberated, as though they are no longer constrained by the rules of the world.

In the tunnels and chambers of the mountain, the cowering pilgrims huddle in their thousands, scared by the howling din of combat outside. The mountain is too big and solid to shake, but the noises of battle echo down the stone flues and rock-cut tunnels, reverberating and amplified like weaponised sonics.

'Be calm!' Keeler cries out, moving through the crowded chambers. 'Be calm! Be still! They cannot reach us in here!'

The panic is spreading. These lost souls walked en masse into the Death Guard in the desert, she thinks. They were fearless then, but now… What is it? Is it the weirdly amplified noise? The unnatural acoustics are upsetting. She can feel the sound in her diaphragm.

Or is it that the pilgrims thought they were safe here, that they had finally reached the shelter they had prayed for, only to have it taken from them?

She clambers up onto a raised rock ledge.

'Be still! Hush!' she calls out, her arms spread. 'You are safe! The Emperor has led us here! He has delivered us to this place! His will alone has done this!'

'You led us!' someone shouts.

'I did not!' she calls back. 'I did not! I followed, just as you followed! I had faith, just as you had faith! I was brought here, just as you were! I heard His voice! We all heard His voice! This is where He wanted us to be! This is the space He has provided for us! So be still! Be calm! Set aside your fears!'

They are beginning to quieten, and that peace is spreading from chamber to chamber, through the giant archways and

massive rectangular apertures.

She drops her voice. It still carries as an echo throughout.

‘Fear is no use,’ she says. ‘It has no purpose. Know not fear. Cast it out. Close it in your hearts and turn it into hope. Turn it into duty. Turn it into fierce faith in Him and Him alone, and by His will, you will be saved. By His will. By the grace of the Throne.’

She begins to recite some verses of the Lectitio. Some of them join in, their voices quiet.

An eerie tranquillity falls upon the chambers, despite the echoing din from without. Weeping stops. Faces grow calm. Some pilgrims murmur to themselves, their hands clasped in front of their mouths. One heart, one focus, one mind, one will.

At the side of one chamber, Cypher looks up. There was a deep tremble of light, just for an instant. He sees brief sparks of coloured light travel, fluttering, along the seams of mineral in the rock.

He glances at the old man.

‘Did you see that?’ he asks quietly. Stupid. The man’s blind.

But Zhi-Meng nods.

‘I felt it, lord,’ he whispers.

‘And can you explain it?’ Cypher asks.

‘The confluence of the mountain,’ says Zhi-Meng, ‘was shaped to respond to psychic broadcast, and to amplify it. The choirs, you see? The massed choirs, in their stalls–’

‘Yes, yes.’

‘Well then, the psycho-acoustics are infinitely sensitive,’ says Zhi-Meng, ‘so they might react, briefly of course, to any strong emotion, even from a group of non-active minds. Fear, of course. Hope. Grief. Collective anxiety, or collective presence. It is all about what is emoted, however raw. Emotion is an energy, Lord Cypher, the core of a psyker’s bond with the

warp. So yes, the will of a few thousand minds like this, caught in the same moment of emotional response, *united* by that, if you will, could indeed produce those sparks of light in the rock. The mountain feels them.'

'What about…' says Cypher. He hesitates. 'What about a million minds? Two million?'

Zhi-Meng shrugs.

'A greater focus?' he suggests.

Cypher steps away. He crosses the huge chamber, picking his way between the knots of pilgrims gathered in huddles on the floor. He looks up at Keeler and beckons her down.

'What, my lord?' she asks, joining him.

'I don't know what you are,' he says.

'So you said.'

'But whatever it is,' he says, 'I want you to do that again.'

9:xix

Sigil

There is no light.

There is no sound.

There is nothing any more.

No steadfast star to guide us.

No voice to call to us.

Terra descends into night, and we go with it. I do not know this night, or what it holds, except that it is blacker and deeper than the old, long night that almost did away with our kind. My king, my friend, lifted us out of that darkness.

I no longer believe he will save us from this one.

Before I died the first time–

No, rather before I consigned myself to this death, and took my place upon this thankless throne to perform this thankless duty, I spoke my last words to my Chosen. It was not a tidy last testament. I did it in haste. But I shared with them anything and everything I could think of, the unfinished plans, the incomplete agendas, the legacies of secrets, the wisdom of a long life lived curiously.

But now, long past the edge of mortal life, I find myself with so much more to say. From this golden seat, I have seen so much, and learned so much. Such terrors and wonders that I could not have conceived of. Such simple truths.

The cosmos has confided in me, because it knows I cannot share its secrets.

I long to make a new testament. A new last will and legacy. It would contain nothing of the things that I shared with my Chosen before death, for none of that matters any more, even though it all seemed so important then. My testament would be the length of aeons and fill the stacks of a library all by itself. It would be the Great Book of Mankind, and in it I would lay out simple truths I have learned from this seat, such that our species might further protect itself. For they are dark truths. The secrets of our predatory universe are far bleaker and more terrible than even the worst of our mortal imaginings.

Except–

I cannot share any of this. Not now. My new testament will remain unwritten, my wisdom unshared. A supreme irony, to learn this much, and never be able to tell a soul.

This throne is a curse. A poisoned grail. To sip from it is to learn all that there is to know, in an instant, and in that same instant be rendered mute, blind and insensible.

All is still now. All is quiet. The winds of Chaos, raging more furiously than ever, are so loud they cannot be heard. The storm that drives them has occluded all sight of my friend, my King-of-Ages, and the transmundane realm in which he stands, and the ruined warship hulk that contains it, and the foe that he faces. The Emperor and Horus are face to face. Father and first-found son. They may be warring, even now. They may be speaking, as wise men speak, as embodiments of concordia and discordia, striving to find some common ground on which to build an accord and end this conflict. It is possible. Horus Lupercal was once a reasonable man, a good man, and he loved his father. If my king can reach that core of emotion he made certain resided in his son, Horus, despite everything, might listen. They may yet walk out of the neverness storm together, carrying peace and an understanding between them. From this seat, knowing what I know now, I can see how easily that understanding could be reached, how effortlessly the fingers of Chaos might be prised back to free Horus Lupercal, so that he can see the lies and deceits that

have beguiled him, and renounce them. But they do not know what I know.

An old man can dream.

They may both be dead already.

Or one may be dead, and the victor standing over his corpse in cheerless triumph.

Forgive me, but I think that victor will be Horus.

The stillness and quiet around me are misleading. There is no sound because I cannot hear. There is no sight because my eyes are gone. The agony persists, but I no longer feel it. All that I am, all that I was, has been devoured by the jaws of this throne. Only this last spark of me remains, a psychic glimmer inside a burned-out skull. I am reduced to a thought. I am merely an idea now, a lingering memory that yet thinks it's alive. I am a symbol of myself, a thought-mark representing the man I used to be.

I am a sigil. I am the concept of Malcador abbreviated to these few simple lines.

I have become my own last secret.

See that sigil now, those scant lines in the dust, for the wind is about to brush them away.

That which was unspoken has failed. The frail mindsight that this sigil of me still possesses can just make out, as through a glass darkly, the vague outlines of the throne room at my feet. The sanction, which pulled me back from the brink and sustained me, is bankrupt. The reserves of psycho-able candidates – those poor souls – are expended. Such loss. Such horror. There is nothing left to reinforce me. Nothing left to keep the daemons at bay. Nothing left to fortify me as I fight to hold the throne stable and maintain the psychomantic equilibrium.

I see a shadow. A face. It is a blur, like a reflection in the filthy window pane of an old house in a time-lost city. I can't

quite make it out. It is Vulkan, I think. The last one here, staying by my side to the end, just as he promised.

Yes, it's Vulkan. Oh, poor child. I recognise him by his guilt. He always had the finest, purest conscience of any of the sons, and what he has been required to do this day, the necessary duties he has been obliged to condone, have harrowed him.

Which is why, of course, it had to be him. No other son could have performed the role with such gravity, for no other son could weigh the costs so sincerely.

The dreadful acts he has committed have broken him, and now he is broken once again, for though those deeds were justified, they were insufficient. Now he regrets them all.

Do not, my son. Do not. But for your actions, I would have perished long ago, and the vacated, un-commanded throne would have destroyed the world. You bought us longer than we ever thought we had. I'm sorry it wasn't enough. Vulkan, you are not to blame.

He cannot hear me.

And now I see what he is preparing to do. The last and worst of all the duties left to him. He is readying the Talisman of Seven Hammers. He has waited as long as he can, hoping against hope, but now he believes the time has come. He will commit the Palace to auto-destruction so that nothing remains for our usurpers to claim or use. Horus will be denied his inheritance.

But it is not yet time. Almost, but not yet. Vulkan, there is still a chance. Vulkan, hear me. Delay a moment longer, for there is still a hope remaining.

Vulkan?

He does not hear me. He does not see it. In his eyes, hope has gone. He thinks I'm dead, and I cannot tell him otherwise. He thinks I'm dead, and the throne is uncontrolled. Vulkan, it is late, but not too late. A moment

more, I beg you. One moment longer! Vulkan! My boy, please–

He does not hear me.

I have lost my voice.

I cannot stay his hand.

The Imperium ends here.

9:xx

Fragments

Many things shatter into fragments as father and son clash.

The air quakes from the impact; a shockwave of sound and pressure that bursts outwards like the punishing slap of a sonic boom. The walls of the Court puff out with the force of it; both the material structures of plasteel and ceramite that form the original fabric of the ship's compartment frame, and the fractal, immaterial structures that clothe it in empyreal majesty like an elaborate disguise. Adamantine bulkheads groan as they flex, stone dressings explode into powder, scaled obsidian geometries ripple like black feathers as they fight to maintain their patterns, deck plates deform, and the ceramite wall tiles crack simultaneously as though each one has been shot point-blank with a bullet.

Physicality shatters. Chips crack from the edge of the Emperor's warblade as it makes contact. Splinters fly from *Worldbreaker*'s haft. Metal scabs shave from power claw and Talon. Plate armours, gold and night-black alike, buckle in the stress of collision.

Energies smash. The Master of Mankind's radiant psychic will shreds into the Warmaster's Chaos-fuelled bloodlight and they mutually annihilate, like matter meeting antimatter, capping the impact with a second, catastrophic detonation.

Sound perforates in acoustic shock. Light deviates and snaps. Time is already broken, but the hovering instant of Lupercal's isochronal moment, his Day of Days, crazes like a glass sphere.

Superimposed realities, both material and warp-dreamt, tear and peel back, flayed from the carcass of this moment, and combust as they slough away, disintegrating into cinders and flakes of ash. The broiling warp, in which the Terrestrial

Realm is now almost completely submerged, ripples as a rupture is blown through its depths. The spit and crackle of its constant motion becomes a scalding sizzle as empyric materials are violently displaced. The whispers become a scream. The scream becomes the neverness.

Other things shatter too, things that are harder to define. All bonds of blood, loyalty and past history that tie these two beings together part like overstretched cables, and the edifice of family, empire and legacy that they support comes crashing down around them like a falling tower or a house of cards.

Neither of them care. Neither of them notice.

Things burst and vanish in an instant, annihilated so completely it is as though they were never there: mercy, restraint, respect, compassion, love.

In His first-found's bloodlit eyes, the Emperor sees all His sins dismembered, all His dreams, His plans, all His permutations and configurations, the painstaking work of millennia obliterated. But He says nothing, and feels nothing, for the human apparatus that would have allowed Him to register that loss is jettisoned and gone.

And in the burning white blaze of his father's gaze, Horus Lupercal sees his own dreams and imaginings of recognition and triumph torn apart, for there is no pain or anger or hurt for him to savour, no shock or despair. He greets this with the rage of Chaos, with the spite of a child disowned, and with demented glee. For he will find his own satisfaction.

A few things remain, not merely whole and unfragmented, but so densely compacted and hyperintensified, they have almost become sentient qualities. Wrath, hate, murder, vengeance, determination and eradication. Such properties have been rendered indestructible in this crucible of violence.

The four, the Old Four, recoil from the clash, their bones shaken, their flesh blistered and scourged by the ferocity. Yet still they lean forward, and crane their necks, and stare in wild delight.

The warblade wheels. The maul swings. The giant antagonists begin to trade blows, and each impact makes fragments of what is already fragmented.

For Loken, LE 2, and the Custodian, there is no way to brace as the collision occurs. They are scant metres away from the Emperor and Horus as they meet head-on. They are thrown headlong by the physical and metaphysical concussion, as though they were grouped around a bomb at the moment of detonation.

Their flailing bodies are flung in different directions. Before they plummet back to the deck, each one is lifted again, and again, tumbling and spinning, borne away by successive shocks that overlap the first, waves of mental and physical backwash that contiguously follow the moment of impact. The blows rained against each other by father and son are so powerful, so inhumanly fast, that they blur into one long, pulsing shockwave, like an unending explosion, that batters and shreds the architectonics of the Court.

This fight is no longer one in which the three can hope to participate. It has shifted to an entirely *other* magnitude where the strength, courage and transhuman abilities of Astartes and Custodes are utterly and woefully insufficient.

All three are mortal and perishable. They are hurled aside by the immortal collision, just three more fragments in the blizzard of debris expanding from the heart of destruction.

Caecaltus Dusk tumbles, helpless, across the tilting deck of the Court, carried like a bundle of twigs by the psychic shockwaves. He glances against an obsidian column, and manages to cling to it, like a man clinging to the trunk of a tree in the face of a hurricane that will soon demolish the entire forest. He sees his torn praesidium shield bounce away, like a golden leaf in the gale, and his paragon spear slide past, just out of reach. He can’t let go of the pillar, because the horizontals of the Court seem to be rapidly becoming verticals. Tephra and cinders, fragments of black tile, and chips of stone

scatter past him, flung outwards by the explosive conflict, stinging as they glance and graze against him.

His hands are wet with blood, slipping on the polished stone. It's his own blood. His Aquilon wargear did little to stop the blow the first-found dealt him with his maul.

I am dying, he thinks. *I am dead. But my king–*

He twists his head to see. The obsidian column he clings to is, far above, bending and swaying in the psykanic tempest. There. *There!* He sees them, two figures, locked in a monumental duel, blade and maul swinging and slicing. One figure is white gold, the other Cthonic black. They look exhausted already, as though they have been fighting for hours or days, twin giants, hunched with fatigue, exchanging savage blows without nuance or polish, slugging and hammering at each other until one of them finally drops. They seem to be so close, just metres from him, so he can hear every gasp and grunt of effort, and see the individual particles of the billowing blood-mists that every blow produces. Yet they also seem an eternity away, reduced to specks by the telescoping corridor of sundered reality, two miniature warriors alone, dwarfed by the vast, dim bowl of fate's amphitheatre.

The banked stalls and levels of that immense colosseum are teeming to capacity, an audience of shadows a trillion strong, jeering on the final contest. They are the lost and the damned, the casualties heaped up by this war of heresy. They have gathered to witness the end of it.

I am one of them, he understands. *Assigned my seat to watch the single combat that will decide it all. To watch and wait…*

That has been his life. Standing, motionless and emotionless. Watching, ever vigilant. Waiting, always ready. Years he has spent, immobile as a statue, at the foot of the Golden Throne, while history happened nearby…

He will not be a spectator. Not now. Not any more. What was he waiting for, if not this? What was he watching for, except

this danger? What was he guarding against, if not this attempt on his master's life?

Caecaltus Dusk will not be a mere spectator. He is Hetaeron. By His will alone, he serves and attends. This moment is the reason he has maintained his life-long vigil. This moment is why he was made. Yet now the moment is come, he cannot–

He looks away. He will not watch, if watching is all he has left to offer. He clings to the flexing black stone. Marble fragments ping off his golden helm and armour. His hands are so slick with blood they are slipping free…

But he is Hetaeron. He is Caecaltus Dusk. By His will alone he exists and serves, and his service is for His will alone.

I will not leave the side of my King-of-Ages while there is breath left in me. I cannot stand by. I will stand by Him, stand with Him. I will fight at His side, as I was made to, past the bounds of death. I am Hetaeron.

He braces his arms. He grips harder, against the bite of the wind. Stone punctures under his fingertips. His heels dig in to the black, fractal patterns, grinding troughs as though through heaped, ebony scales.

He stands. By His will alone, he stands.

The neverness winds assail him. He does not bow nor bend like the vast stone column behind him. The psychic shockwaves batter him. He does not stoop or flinch.

He takes a step. A second. A third. Each one is a labour against the elemental violence. He reaches his fallen spear, and picks it up. Some last spark of his king's power crackles through it.

He turns and walks, one impossible step after another, towards the fight. Caecaltus has died once in the Emperor's service, used as an instrument and burned out. He is grateful he has a second life to give. He wishes he had more.

Leetu lands hard, bounces, rolls, and slides to rest. Wreckage rains down on the deck around him.

He’s hurt, winded, dazed. He gets up anyway.

He has seen the infamous Lupercal, first-hand and up close. No man should have to face such a monster alone, not even a man like the Master of Mankind.

Leetu retrieves his borrowed sword. He knows that there is very little he can do, but he’ll do whatever that might turn out to be. He promised his mistress he would. Such promises are binding. Leetu has never made a formal oath of moment like the ones pledged by the Astartes that came after him. His promise to Erda was more personal, more powerful. He hefts *Mourn-It-All* and looks around. He sees–

A fight he can’t be part of.

The Emperor and Horus are duelling just thirty metres away. Leetu has never seen such power, and he’s certainly never seen such skill, not once in his life. The Emperor, haloed by golden radiance, is attacking with claws and sword, switching from one weapon to the other, then combining both, a masterclass of close-combat technique. Though the weapons – the huge warblade and the rending power claw – are heavy and brutal instruments, designed for lumbering battlecraft and maximum damage, the Emperor wields them as lightly and deftly as a rapier and dagger, darting and spinning, blocking, cutting, thrusting, using them both with dazzling precision and elegance. His lithe movements remind Leetu of aeldari dancers he once saw while accompanying his mistress on an unexplained journey. They are the sequences of the sacred masque, the expression of absolute warfare as art.

Horus, an abomination of seething warpflux that seems almost twice the Emperor’s size, is armed even more crudely. His talons are immense industrial pincers, wheezing steam from their pneumatic valves, and his maul is wrought to do nothing more than batter and break. But – and Leetu can scarcely believe what he is seeing – the behemoth Lupercal is fluid and nimble too, despite his atrocious, night-black mass. Such is his sheer power, Horus is matching his adversary in refinement and dexterity. *More* than matching. His blows and

parries are not mere mindless power. They are subtle, surgical, intuitive.

Over the years, Leetu has heard much of the Lupercal's battle prowess. He has never doubted that Horus is a fine warrior, for only a fine warrior could have been anointed Warmaster, but he has treated the extravagant stories of talent and skill with circumspection.

They were not exaggerations. Even now, encumbered by the weight of Chaos Incarnate, shrouded in the warp, distorted into a form so awful and bestial that Leetu can scarcely bear to look at it, Horus is also a master. His method is sublime. He is using the maul and the talons with bewildering genius, every motion lightning-fast, every stroke calculated a dozen moves in advance, and not one of them bluntly telegraphed.

And then there is the speed. The *inhuman* speed. As they wheel and flow around the Court, the pair of them are barely more than motion-blurs to him. Leetu's transhuman perception struggles to track them or keep up with the hyper-rapid dialogue of weapons. They are moving so swiftly, there is an almost constant concussion as the air is violently displaced. Every time Leetu makes a tentative move towards them, they have circled away again, travelling at a rate that Leetu knows he can't match. Joining the fight is like trying to board a vehicle already in motion. He tries again, but seems almost static beside them. He pursues them into a colonnade, but all he finds there is broken stone and fragments of rubble where their whirring weapons have clipped chunks out of the walls or felled archway piers like saplings. They are already behind him. He turns, and is almost trampled as they sweep past.

It is impossible to engage. They are clashing at a different register of speed. At the peak of his reflexes, Leetu cannot hope to synchronise with them for long enough to land a blow, and if he tried, he would be pulverised like driftwood in a millisecond. He gazes in abject awe. He feels–

He understands the freezing dread that humans feel when they behold Astartes in battle.

He lowers his blade, helpless, useless. He is a lone observer of this titanic struggle, an interloper, surplus to requirements, an accidental bystander who has stumbled onstage from the wings, but has no part to play and knows none of the lines. The sense of impotence is agonising. This spectacle will decide the destiny of his species, but he can only watch.

Infuriated, choked by frustration, Leetu looks around for the others. Perhaps together, they can–

But there is no sign of the Luna Wolf Loken or the proud Custodian proconsul anywhere in the Court. Have they already tried what he is attempting? Have they thrown themselves into the fight and been reduced to smears, torn apart by the fury of contesting gods? The locked focus between father and son is so intense, Leetu doubts either of them would have even noticed who they were crushing underfoot.

The Court itself is no longer the dark cathedral Leetu entered at the Emperor's side. He sees that now. The infinite architecture of the first-found's temple of Ruin must have been shattered by the force of that initial, bomb-blast collision, or else Horus has allowed the black, fractal madness to de-manifest so he can concentrate all his power on the battle. Now revealed is the vast compartment of a once-regal warship. It is peeling and decayed. The pale deck of ouslite and flecked marble is pitted and scored. The brass walls and black pipework are rusted, and the riveted seams crusted with corrosion. There were banners hung on the walls, the standards of proud companies, Leetu imagines, but they have all burned away, leaving nothing but their scorched cross-spars and frames. Only one remains, the Eye of Terra, the rallying symbol of the Great Crusade, charred and threadbare.

Leetu wonders if the disappearance of the terrible, infinite architecture is a promise of hope. The Lupercal Court was an aspect, a palace of terror instantiated by the warp to terrify and intimidate the first-found's visitors. If Lupercal has suspended it to divert power to his limbs, it suggests that his power is finite. Perhaps he is not the limitless expression of Chaos that

they feared. Perhaps he is being tested to his thresholds by the Emperor's strength.

Perhaps he is weakening.

It would explain why the combat is just that – single combat, man-to-man. Leetu can discern no trace of psychic conflict, other than the internalised force that drives their bodies and feeds their weapons. No immaterial duel rages between them, no blasts of psychic force, or bolts of lightning, or beams of gouging light.

Perhaps, for all their speed and strength, they are wearing each other down, burning each other out, so that sword and maul and claws and skill are the only weapons left with which this can be settled.

Leetu is forced to duck aside as they thunder past again, Horus driving the Emperor back into guardrails and a partition bulkhead that explode into fragments as they crash through them.

Rising, Leetu sees the Angel.

Though there is no trace of Loken or Caecaltus, the corpse of the Emperor's angelic child still lies on the broken deck, dusted with powder and debris. Leetu hurries to the body. It is laid out in a clumsy, disjointed sprawl, and the wounds upon it are appalling to see. Even so, Leetu reaches down and gently touches the bloody throat. There is no pulse, no heat. Sanguinius is cold and gone. Indeed, he seems more than lifeless. The Great Angel, it seems, has suffered worse than mortal death. Spirit and soul have been obliterated. There is a terrible sense of utter extinction, as though life has not just been ended, but was never there to begin with.

Leetu sees movement in the shadows nearby, the scurry of rats in ventilation grates, the flicker of vermin behind coolant ducts. Neverborn scavengers have come to feed, drawn by the odour of death. Despite the calamitous conflict nearby, which makes them quail and hesitate, their hunger is overcoming their timidity. They are beginning to creep and scuttle forward,

to pick over the bones, to snatch a mouthful of flesh, to gnaw off some portion of the kill they can flee with, back to the shadows, and devour.

Leetu starts in dismay. The first darts in, brazen. It looks like a skinned dog. Leetu hacks *Mourn-It-All* through its skull, and knocks it away. A second scurries forward, and he puts his blade through it, then a third, which he catches with a glancing blow and sends yelping into retreat. But a fourth has already got its jaws around the Angel's ankle, and a fifth is lapping blood from the soaked feathers of a wing.

Leetu growls. He will not permit this desecration. He drives them off, butchering those he can, but as fast as he chases them away, to a protest of whining and yapping, others scuttle in from different angles, emboldened and eager.

Revolted, he stands astride the Angel's body, and stabs and slashes to keep them at bay. They are swarming from the shadows now, an encircling tide, barking and growling and snorting. Some are small, the size of rodents, but others are larger and more fearless, hideous things of matted fur and wild eyes, things that drool and laugh, spined things that glisten and slither, bloated things with abattoir-claws and shearing chisel-teeth.

It becomes a frenzy, his frantic blade trailing their blood and fibre in the air, dappling the deck with ichor. They pour in from all sides.

And he realises, as he chops and jabs, that while dead meat is easy and appetising, living flesh is an appealing delicacy too.

Loken wakes, face down, in a litter of fragments. He wonders where the others have gone… Leetu, the proconsul… His father… His father's father.

He wonders where the *Vengeful Spirit* has gone.

He lies on a patch of its deck, but that patch sits like a ragged raft in a sea made of polished sectile flooring. The room is huge and dark, another work of infinite architecture designed

to terrify and intimidate, but it's not the Court composed by his gene-sire.

It is vacant. It is vast. Its colossal, twilit length is marked out by huge scissor arches and acanthus-capped columns.

It is the Throne Room.

Or, at least, it was.

Loken rises. Ash and embers drift in the gloom. There are roasted and fused human skeletons scattered everywhere. Behind him, a great Silver Door is ruptured off its hinges. A night wind howls its lament.

There is no ceiling left, no roof. Above him, the Palace gapes, ruinously open to the sky, the immense columns and arches truncated where the vault they support has been torn away. The great hearth-hall of the high king, sacked and abandoned.

The sky is the darkest night of all, tinged with the red glow of a neverness storm that rages across all of Terra.

He sees a fire burning at the far end of the nave, the only real source of light in the gloom. He walks towards it. It takes a long time to walk the length of the terrible room.

He approaches the fire. It is fierce, but contained. It is a man, impossible to identify, on fire from head to foot. He is sitting on a throne. He cannot be alive, for the crackling yellow flames consume him, and he does not twist or thrash in helpless agony. But he also cannot be dead, because his body is not shrivelled and contorted by the action of the flames. He just sits there, his head upright, his arms on the armrests, his feet on the floor, ablaze.

The throne is small, a simple, high-backed wooden chair, lacquered red and marked with curious sigils. Somehow the wood of the little throne remains untouched by the flames leaping from the figure it supports.

Behind the burning figure on its little throne, a huge lake of liquid metal covers a wide area of the inlaid floor. It is molten gold, gold reduced to fluid state by savage furnace heat. The

lake of metal smokes like lava, slowly cooling, but Loken can feel the radiating glow coming off it like an oven. Around the metal pool, the floor is scorched black with soot except for the outline of large human figures arranged in a circular pattern. They look like shadows, like anti-shadows. Loken wonders how instantaneously the men who cast them were vaporised.

'Is this a dream?' he asks out loud. No one answers him, not even the wind, and not the burning figure in the chair, though Loken half-expected it would.

He looks up at the sky. How can anyone tell dream from reality any more? Nothing can be trusted. But instinct tells him that this *is* a dream, and it's one of his father's. Has his genesire placed Loken inside it to punish him? That won't work. This scene, though eerie and forlorn, is nothing compared to the visions that the daemon showed him. That prospect of Aeternity broke his mind but he, through the power of the Emperor's will, has passed beyond such debilitating madness. No sight can hurt him any more, not even this tragedy.

It is pitifully sad, but it's just a room.

It's just a *dream* of a room. Loken's certainty increases. The Emperor placed His power in Loken, so that he could act as His instrument. Indeed, Loken's selection for that role was made by the man that Loken suspects is quietly burning in the chair nearby.

A small vestige of that power remains in him. He can feel it in his bones and his blood, and in the sparks that course along the blade of Rubio's sword. If that pulsing trace of power remains, then the Emperor is still alive.

Somewhere.

And if this is a dream, then that somewhere must be close by. The thready trace of power permits Loken some clarity of perception, the clarity he presumes is second nature to those born as psykers. It is unfamiliar to him, for he has no psykanic training, but it has led him this far. He tries to determine what is real and what is not. Rubio's sword is real. His wargear is

real. The scorch marks left across his chestplate by Lupercal's lightning… They are real. The flesh, burned and blistered beneath the chestplate from that near miss… That's real too. His flesh is real. The Angel's blood on his hands is real.

This is the *Vengeful Spirit*. Loken hasn't shifted or been translocated again. He's still there, in the Court. This is an illusion, another aspect of the Court's fractal architecture, a psychic fragment conjured by the warp from his father's imagination.

It's probably one of many.

Because the combat is underway. The Emperor and his father, in single combat. And that combat can't and won't be just two men pitching sword and maul against each other. It will be physical, yes, but it will be more than physical at the same time. It will be a duel of flesh and bone, of iron and steel, yet also a duel of minds and wills, of souls, of magick, and of the sorceries of the immaterial. It will be a *hundred* duels, all fought at once, combats occurring simultaneously on the mortal plane and the empyric, in the realm of materia and the anti-realm of immateria. They will assail each other with every means available, and both of them will shield and defend themselves against every possible line of attack. One slip, one distraction, one angle left unguarded, is an opening the other can lethally exploit.

It is a total war, a single fight multiplied across infinite methods, all waged in perfect unison.

And this, this place, this dream, is a fragment of it. A fragment of the psychic war running parallel with the physical one.

As this revelation comes to him, clear and true, Loken begins to hear the rumble and chime of weapons, of a blade striking armour, of a maul denting plate. It is the thunder of distant giants. It is echoing through the walls of the derelict throne room, as though it is happening outside. Loken is sure that the sounds of fierce combat have been there all along, from the moment he woke up, but he can only hear them now he

understands where he is and what it represents. It is an occulted acoustic he had to become attuned to, like adjusting a dial to lock a specific vox-transmission.

He can hear the molten hiss of a force-blade skinning the air, the whoosh of a worldbreaking maul bending gravity. He can hear power armour grinding as it moves, plate segments clattering as they articulate. He can hear the dull stamp of armoured feet as they step and shift across a shivering deck, the blitz-crackle of refractor fields and personal shields as they take hits and dissipate kinetic force, the straining whine of compact reactors. He can hear the laboured breathing of two men exerting supreme effort, the ragged gasps, the straining grunts and stifled groans.

He can hear minds singing. One is a high, clear note, painfully sharp and continuous, like a fingertip running around the lip of a glass to maintain a ringing harmonic. It pierces the twilight like a crack running through crystal. The other is a deep drone, a long growl from the chest and throat that swells and resonates, accompanied by the heartbeat thump of a kettle drum that marks out a nine-beat rhythm. It crackles with the cinder-spit of the warp.

Loken looks up. The sounds are right outside. To his left… Then to his right… Then beyond the ruined Silver Door… Then behind the nave's end wall.

The combatants are circling the room.

There is a sharp crack of impact. Loken wheels around in time to see a dent appear in the wall of the chamber across the nave. The stone bulges and crumbled plaster patters down. Something struck against the wall outside. A second later, and fifty metres to the left, another mark appears in a puff of brick-dust and plaster chips as the wall is struck again. A third impact near the broken choir stalls displaces stone blocks and leaves a jagged crack three metres long.

Shadows jump and dance along the walls, thrown by the flame-light of the burning figure in the chair. They are smudged shadows at first, but slowly they become moving

shapes as Loken attunes his mind to the visions as he did the sounds. Silhouettes form and flicker, sliding over the skin of the wall like ghosts, a shadow-play cast by the figure in the wooden throne. There, distinctly, the phantom outline of the Master of Mankind, swinging His body, sword aloft. There, the spectral mass of Lupercal, broad and hunched as he lunges forward. There, the two of them, brawling in close contact, the shadows becoming one as they turn together.

The shadows, which flutter like dream fragments, are huge, stretched and distorted, elongated titans bent and crooked by the contours and features of the walls.

Loken watches them with grim fascination. The shadows come and go, appear and disappear. There is no predicting where the next shapes will appear, or how long they will remain. As they flare and fade, they remind Loken intensely of ancient rock art, of the figures men once scratched and painted on the walls of caves long ago. Here, a man mid-leap. There, another turning to evade. These are the weapons they are carrying. This is the path that the sword will follow. This is where the maul will strike, this flank here. What is set out here on the wall in the shadows is happening now.

It is sympathetic magic.

The shadows are the ripples of the fight relayed through stone and written in flame, the after-images of each instant echoing through materia and immateria. They are not flashes of some desired future. They are the future made *present*. The dressed stone of the throne room walls is just a membrane, not solid at all, but a veil on which the etheric world is projected. The images of father and son are just tracings of things on the *other* side.

Loken has to reach them. The gene-coded loyalty of the Astartes is an imperative. He must stand at the Emperor's side, and protect Him. *The Emperor is the shield and protector of humanity, but what is His shield? Us. We are. It is reciprocal. We are souls bound together. We are together as one or we are nothing.*

He will be surely going to his death, but he doesn't care: the daemon Samus' torment has excised from him all fear of his own mortality. Besides, his conditioned loyalty, enough in itself, is amplified by emotion, that precious luxury the Emperor gifted to all His descendants. Loken feels guilt, responsibility… It was his words and his counsel that clinched Persson's argument and persuaded the Emperor to reject the promise of godhood. *Better to fight daemons as men than become them.* Thanks to those words, the Emperor renounced the gathering strength that would have allowed Him easily to crush Horus Lupercal. As a consequence, the Master of Mankind has entered into this undertaking with finite power to face a foe with limitless reserves. He needs all the help He can muster.

And, after all, Loken was chosen for this.

He has to find a way to them. He is caught in a mere fragment of the contest, one facet of the mind-war. Presumably, he was thrown there by the force of the initial clash. He has to find a way out of it and, no doubt, a route through other facets and layers of the battle too, until he enters the heart of it.

On impulse, as the din of combat continues to ring out, and the warring shadows continue their dance across the walls, Loken turns to the burning figure in the chair.

'You chose me,' he says. 'Was it you, or were you merely doing your master's bidding?'

The flames do not answer.

'Was I chosen because of the part I have played in this history of violence?'

The flames merely crackle.

'No,' Loken decides. 'I am a weapon of specific injury. I saw how my father blanched at the sight of me. I hurt him. That's why you chose me.'

The flames neither confirm nor deny.

‘Are you even still alive, Sigillite?’

He will get no answers. He takes his sword, and holds the blade to the flames leaping off the seated figure. After a second or two, the blade begins to glow, then shine. Fire transfers. As Loken takes the sword away, Rubio’s blade is aflame from tip to ricasso.

He holds the sword up, like a torch. Soft flames course and flutter along its length. He walks back down the nave, casting his own flickering shadows now. He watches the walls and the stout stone columns, and sees where the flame-light of his blade is making a shadow-play for him. The two phantom figures circle and dance, hacking and swinging, across the face of this pillar, then that basalt column, over this stretch of floor, along that piece of wall. He follows them as they move ahead of him. He follows the motion and the sounds.

He reaches the ruined Silver Door, where the passing shadows play briefly across the buckled gleam of eternity’s final portal. He steps over the cremated remains of giants in golden armour, who fell where they stood, their auramite black with fulgurite soot.

He steps outside into the night. There is no Palace beyond the door, no Inner Sanctum, no final fortress. An apocalyptic waste of blackened stone greets him, stretching as far as he can see under the caul of night. Nothing besides remains. Ruin has claimed Terra whole.

The icy winds of the neverness storm batter him. Blood-sleet patters off his plate. By the light of his sword, he sees the transient shadows again, flickering across the sundered stones. He moves forward, in pursuit.

The gale trembles and draws at the flames around his blade. But they do not go out.

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Heart of neverness

When you clash with your father, the whole world shakes.

Just as it should. This is the moment that changes everything. It is the culmination of your everlasting Day of Days, and it will decide everything that comes after. It is only right that the world should tremble as it witnesses an act of such exceptional significance.

You have longed for this confrontation. But dreaded it too. Is it possible to want something so much, and yet loathe the thought of it ever happening?

The question is academic. It *is* happening.

There is no easing into it, no courteous test blows and probing jabs to gauge the other's qualities before the fight begins in earnest. He simply charges you, raising a shield of psychic force in front of Him like the prow-ram of a war galley. A backward step or a sideways evasion are not options. You could stand your ground to meet it–

You drive into it instead. You answer charge with charge. Your father must understand from the outset that He will not enjoy a dominant role in this duel. You meet force with force, summoning a battering ram of your own that reinforces your forward refractors with immaterial potency.

The impact is catastrophic and numbing.

As to your question, well… The Emperor must die. This is the only course of action left to you. You had to assume that it would come to this; you know your father's intractable character too well. That's why you set your lures and prepared this beautiful trap, and why you laid in wait in a blind of self-induced amnesia. The Emperor must die, and only you can ensure His death. You declared to your sons that this would be

the inevitable outcome. You made a boast of it. The Emperor must die. It became their war cry.

Your skull jolts, and you smell blood in your nostrils and your throat. Your psychic weapons mutually annihilate as they collide, and they do so with such force that the shockwave levels the psychoscape around you. He is knocked back by the collision. You are not. You hold firm. The Emperor must die.

But you are His son. You undertake this deed with regret. A son should not have to kill his father. You had hoped that it would turn out to be a mistake born of misunderstanding. He would see, at the last, that you could not be turned from the path you had chosen, and *should* not, for that path was sublime. It would be a revelation to Him. He would stop. He would submit to you, and this would all be avoided.

You even gave Him that chance. You did. More than once. Just like your angel brother. You gave Him every chance to admit He was wrong. You offered Him the opportunity to accept His error and surrender. Indeed – and this is a mark of your maturity and restraint – you would have embraced Him if He had done so. You would have embraced Him unconditionally. You would have forgiven Him, and willingly provided Him with a place at your side as part of the cosmotellurian order you have forged. A place of high honour. You had a throne waiting for Him.

But He didn't submit. He didn't surrender. There was no revelation. Worse, He considered you a lost cause. He didn't even bother to decline your offer. He didn't acknowledge you at all.

His war-sword sweeps at you in a slicing cross. You parry it with your maul, a thunderclap. But you remember Thekla Secundus, and the tricks He taught you there. The slicing sword is only half of the movement. Even as you smack it aside, His claws are punching up to crush your ribs. Your Talon slaps them away.

You show Him you have not forgotten the techniques He taught you in those thirty sweet years. You hope it might make

Him recall–

It doesn’t. He ignores your playful reminder of the tight bond you once shared, just as He ignored you when He marched into your Court, and just as He refused to acknowledge your generous terms for His submission.

You are angry and hurt. Scorned, indentured, ignored, disowned. The Emperor will never change, so the Emperor must die, and you must be the one to put Him down. Though He is your father, and you didn’t want it to end like this, He has left you no other choice. And now you have something to prove.

Yourself.

This has become more than a formality of execution. He will acknowledge you before you kill Him. You will make Him confess the sins He has committed against you. You are not some enemy to be illuminated or xenos threat to be extinguished. You have accomplished more in your brief centuries than He has done in His eternity. You have outdone Him. You are His superior, His successor, His heir. You’re going to get that recognition. You’re going to make Him look you in the face and, with His last breath, scream it.

A downward slash. You sidestep, and swing for His head. He has anticipated, of course. You would have been disappointed if so obvious a blow had caught Him unawares. He turns into it, and catches the head of your maul in His claws to block it. A small supernova is born from this impact. He holds on, pinning the maul’s head, and thrusts His war-sword to exploit your open guard. Your Talon seizes the stabbing blade, twists it aside, then releases to rip off His head.

He ducks clear, the Talon merely scoring the edge of His refractor field, but He’s forced to let go of your maul to achieve that clearance. You whirl it, pressing Him, landing one strike low that His shields stop, then one high that He fends away with a back-slap of His claws.

You let the momentum of the fending slap carry the maul backwards instead of fighting it, then convert it into an underswing loop that brings *Worldbreaker* back inside His left-quarter guard.

It catches Him in the sternum on the upswing. There is a satisfying flare of overtaxed shields, and an even more satisfying thump as He is briefly lifted off the deck and forced back on His heels.

He's strong. You're stronger. You reflect, as He stumbles away so gratifyingly, that this *is* what you want. Of course it is. Only the trace residue of your human self, that tenuous relic of what you were before, has raised any qualms in your mind. You are a god, and the world operates in submission to your will. When you drew up your plans to confront Him, you knew damn well that this would be the consequence. Whether your old self had the stomach for it or not, you made this happen. You are a god, and gods don't make mistakes. You decreed this and it has come to pass. It is the right thing, because you decided it was.

As He rocks back, you make the Thekla Secundus move yourself, because He has just used it, and He will not expect you to mimic Him. His war-sword blocks *Worldbreaker* inches from the side of His head. His claws are not fast enough to stop the upward scission of your Talon. The tips collapse His thoracic shielding, short out refractor fields with a squeal of air, and shred across His ribs and chest in a shower of sparks and auramite shavings.

Lucky. He was lucky. If you'd been a fingertip closer, the Talon would have snapped His ribs like sticks, and punctured His lungs.

It is wise to remember that you are a new god, and still learning how to be what you are. No one ever told you what it would be like, because no one's ever done it before. That shred of human soul, preserved within you as a memento, is struggling to appreciate the decisions that your theandric will has made. That dissonance is uncomfortable. Tell yourself that

the greater, wiser you has made the right choice. No one has told you to do this. No one guided you, or tricked you, or persuaded you. The Old Four who watch you, and lavish you with gifts, never asked for this or compelled you to do it. They barely speak at all. This is your decision.

The gifts they have supplied allow you a great insight, although you have yet to fully trust it. You still cling too closely to the comfortable human perspectives on which you once relied. You must unlearn them. You are a being of Chaos. You *are* Chaos. You are everything that power and property allows you to be. You can see the maelstrom nature of Chaos. It has no logic, or sequence, or syntax. There is no reason or unreason, no right or wrong. Chaos allows all things to be, despite their contradictions and incongruities. Chaos permits everything. So when your old self asks if this is what you want, the answer is not yes or no. It can be yes *and* no. You can long for something and dread it in the same breath. You can want it and loathe it in the same instant. You can love your father and decide to kill Him. You can yearn for His acknowledgement and respect, and resolve that the Emperor must die. These are not incompatible feelings or antithetical ideas.

Within Chaos, there can be no heresy.

Embrace Him as He attacks you. Delight in the crime of striking your father, of seeing the blood spurt like sea-spray. Rejoice that He has disowned you. Love His hate and hate His love.

Throw yourself into this deed wholeheartedly. Know no fear. He is the most potent human in the galaxy, by some magnitude, and He comes to your Court at the peak of His powers. Relish the unthinkable. Slay your creator to prove yourself. Accept that you have secretly *always* wanted to. Victory will win this war, but it will also demonstrate your fitness to rule. The king is dead, long live the king, and with the bloody mark of your hand, you signify it. Your supremacy will be unequivocal. No one tells you what it's like to be a god, but *this*… this obligation forced on you by your father's

arrogance, it provides you with an unparalleled opportunity for self-discovery. This is your proving ground. You will learn how to be a god, fully, by testing your limits and potentials against the only real measure that exists.

Just like your sons, sparring in the practice cages, you will become better, and learn about yourself, and hone your talents, by lethal rehearsal against the only worthy opponent.

He rotates out of the impact of your Talon, and the pair of you start to circle. He's trying to build a little space and a little motion, as though He intends to fence with you. His sword is at a high guard, shoulder height with the tip aimed at you. His claws are curled in front of His hip, where one would hold the partner dagger for quick parries. He makes a rapid lunge. You sidestep and the blade goes past your ear. He thrusts again, and you turn out from the blade as it misses you a second time.

The third lunge, which you were expecting, comes at your throat along a centre line. You were anticipating a thrust to the gut, because you remember the compliance of Carthae, where you observed His ploys against the Ewl Wyra Fesh paladins. Two long thrusts at the head to bring the guard up, then a third to run in under at the exposed abdomen. You had slightly lowered your guard in expectation, but He keeps the stroke high. His blade spears through the aegis of your mesial refractors in a strobing shriek, and only the resistance of those puncturing energy skins slows it enough for you to effect a hasty deflection.

So, the old man is adjusting His tricks because He knows *you* know them.

You would have been disappointed if He had made this too easy. But you are also annoyed. He has you on the back foot suddenly, marginally off balance due to the haste of your reflexive deflection. He presses that lapse urgently, now striking with the edge of His blade in hacking sabre-strokes. You try to peel away, taking blows across the side and shoulder that dent your layered pauldrons and slice sheaves of servo-muscle. You manage an inefficient parry with your

maul, and then are pushed into esquive. The war-sword turns back the counter-assault of your maul, but His lightning claws have found your chest, and they discharge point-blank.

The blast hurls you backwards through something. A bulkhead, perhaps. Materia shatters around you like ice. He won't give you a second to recover. He redoubles His assault, the sword lancing at you in a heart-stabbing thrust. He has charged the blade with such power, the ancient runes engraved on its fuller are glowing like stars.

Ah, He's good. Magnificent. You had forgotten the brilliance of His technique. It is not your father's power, which is modest compared to your limitless supply. It is what He *does* with it.

You manage, just barely, to block His thrust by means of a necromatic shield that bends the sword away into an adjacent plane of the warp. He burns the shield into scorched gossamer with an angry flash of His eyes. His claws lash in to skin your face. You hammer *Worldbreaker* into the deck, bouncing the debris scattered around you into the air, then, with a nod, hurl it all at Him like a horizontal rockfall. He throws up a talismatic barrier with a deft gesture of His clawed hand, and the psychic ward stops most of it. His sword bats away the larger chunks that tear through the ward, all except one lump the size of an anvil, which cracks against His left pauldron, and knocks Him askew.

His guard is wide open for a moment. You plunge into that gap with your Talon as straight as daggers. He makes a deflection, slightly unrefined but successful, cracking sparks off your wrist-guard with His blade. That pivots you out of the optimum line of address, so you club into His plastron with the butt of *Worldbreaker*'s haft, jar Him off-step, then let your grip slip to the base and loop the maul at Him with full extension.

His parry is particularly impressive. He parries your swing with Cthonia. You are on the flat top of a dirty rockcrete parapet above a stagnant spillway. The radioactive glare is as harsh as the stink of the place. He is making His riposte, war-sword glinting in the ionising light. You knock it back, then

you pitch ruthless blows at one another as you move along the lip of the decaying bulwark. Did He think that memories of your wretched childhood here would prise open your guard? Manipulation of the psychotecture to wrong-foot you is an impressive trick–

No. Great gods, this *is* Cthonia. He hasn't just refashioned the psychoscape of your Court as a makeshift weapon. He has shifted you both across the three dimensions of physical locality, and the fourth of temporal placement. This is Cthonia, the hinterland of the Athonat Exhaustion where the territories of the Catulan and the Justaerin clans meet in dispute. This may be the very day on which you were found.

He can see your surprise. He pushes in to exploit it. You hammer away a series of aggressive sword-strokes. In pulling off this trick, He has revealed His understanding of your domain. Not just your Court, but the wider realm of Chaos that inevitably surrounds it. He has grasped that everything, and everywhere, and everywhen, meets here in your isochronal nexus, conjoined by the warp, and thus that everything, and everywhere, and everywhen, is accessible.

It's not your father's power, it's what He *does* with it.

Yet, for the sake of an impressive parry, He has given away two crucial secrets. First, the true extent of His warpcraft, which means that your psychic duel, already running alongside your physical conflict, must now take precedence.

The second is His shameless cruelty. Cthonia wasn't a clever parry to avert your hurtling maul. It was a cold-blooded riposte intended to wound you. For reasons you cannot quite determine, your father seems to have no emotional core. Perhaps the damage done to Him as He fought His way through the *Vengeful Spirit* was more considerable than you thought. Perhaps He is injured more grievously than He appears. Perhaps that is why He seems so cold, and why He refused to acknowledge you, His first-found son.

But you *do* possess a vital emotional core, and He knows it, because He gave it to you. And now He seeks, without

remorse, to inflict wounds upon it, wounds as deep and critical as a blade to the heart or a hammer to the skull. He seeks to hurt you where the marks will not show, tear you deep inside, stab you through the soul, and bleed you out until you are too weak to defend yourself, and He can finish you.

By any means necessary, eh? Whatever it takes? This is a low blow, unsporting, a dirty trick. It hasn't worked, of course, because the Athonat Exhaustion simply serves to remind you how far you've come, and what you have achieved. It is amusing to think He believes this causes you any kind of pain.

And it tellingly reveals a third truth too. To stoop so low, to attempt something so intentionally callous, your father must be desperate. He is backed into a corner, and He is trying anything and everything to keep you at bay.

You renew the vigour of your assault. Your maul batters at His plate and refractor fields. The echoes of those impacts ring from the forlorn walls and polluted spoil heaps of your foundling years. He cleaves back with His war-sword, and scythes with His claws.

You make your riposte. The Himalazia. The roof of the world that was. A fierce blue sky and fiercer cold. He reels from this counter-attack, and you slide together down a steep slope of powder snow, exchanging blows at close quarters. You show Him you can fight as unscrupulously as Him. These are the soaring peaks that His pride will level. Let Him contemplate a lonely death here, unmourned and unmarked, surrounded by the snow-capped emblems of His titanic hubris.

He does not waver. He maintains His rate, not a hint of gapping in His guard, driving you down the blinding white flank of snow, ice crystals swirling around you like winter breath, His sword seeking your heart, His claws hunting your throat. You stop the blade with *Worldbreaker*'s haft, lunge with your Talon–

He parries you with Isstvan V, still white-hot and smouldering from your victory. The air is dense with virus smog and organic ash, and the ground beneath your feet is a

solid block of fused ceramite like a toppled frieze depicting battle-brothers at war. Perhaps He can illuminate you. How is this supposed to hurt? He did this, not you. This atrocity is His fault, and with your next blow, you show Him why–

Molech. Yes, Molech. Nothing but a festering darkness in which falsehoods whisper and lies breed. There is the faint glimmer of the gate through which He once passed, to make promises He would break, and to steal a fire that He would covet for Himself. Here is the stink of true betrayal, of old gods antagonised by a solemn pact dishonoured, of secret truths and dreadful insights that, in defiance of all reason, will never be shared with the sons who love Him.

This is the birthplace of all deceit. From this source came all the fundamental doctrines He should have taught to you and your brothers, the knowledge that would have fortified you, and protected you, and allowed you to build an interstellar culture on solid foundations.

He taught you nothing. He let you go out among the stars ignorant and vulnerable. This place, more than any other, epitomises the toxic privacy that has dominated His behaviour, the selfish, acquisitive greed, and the abject lack of trust He has shown to His own flesh and blood.

To *you*.

He names you betrayer. He declares you traitor. He believes your dissent is heresy, but heresy requires a truth to oppose. Hypocrite! The truth was here all along, but He kept it from you. This darkness is a testament to His obsessive, hermetic indifference. He betrayed you and your siblings and your sons. The fire was meant to be shared. Instead, He used it to ignite a war.

He let the galaxy burn.

Molech seems to shake Him like a solid body blow. As His guard slips, you block His sword and spear Him to the core with a beam of bloodlight that lances from the unblinking eye on your chestplate. He writhes on that skewer of red rage. It

has punctured His soul and amputated nine hundred years of His life. You keep Him pinned with the beam, still bleeding years in an arterial torrent, and you open your Talon, raking Him with incandescent lightning. The lightning, drawn from the deepest storms of the empyrean, fries His flesh and roasts Him alive. His agony is profound. He tries to tear free, but neither the bloodlight nor the lightning will let Him go. You increase the fury of both.

They destroy Him.

He explodes in a cloud of white ash.

Nothing remains but silence.

You step forward. Some of the ash drifts back across you, dusting the contours of your war plate. Nothing remains except a patch of vitrified ground.

Are you done? It can't be that easy.

You unfurl your mindsight and survey the intermingled territories of your realm.

Ah yes, not done at all. Across the planes and layers of your Day of Days, the propagating duels of your psychomachia are still raging. On Isstvan V, you are cracking His golden plate with *Worldbreaker* as He sears you with wild bolts of immaterial power. In the lost Himalazia, He pursues you down a sheer incline of green ice and black rock, lacerating your face with His relentless war-sword. In the abandoned workings beneath Athonat Exhaustion, you hang back and mind-goad mobs of Catulan, Justaerin and Helleborae gangers to swarm Him in a blitz-attack. White fire blazes from His irritated eyes as He blinks one to atoms. Then He blinks again, and annihilates the rest in a swathe of flame.

You behold them all, every facet of this psychic duel, occurring simultaneously. In some, like Mohenjo-Daro, where you spill His blood on the mound where that great city is yet to be built, or Kasr Undak on Cadia, where you pin Him to a noctilith pylon with your Talon, you are clearly winning. In others, like Gorro scrapworld, where He herds a Waaagh! of

xenos brutes with His will to rend you limb from limb, or Tizca, where a spark from His mind has just set you on fire, He has the upper hand.

In others, like the Court, where you still slug it out, hand-to-hand, or the mirror-finished Field of Triumph on Ullanor, where you both stand frozen, face to face, your minds locked in furiously silent thoughtwar, the contest remains in the balance, and the outcome undecided.

Here, on Molech, you have simply concluded one bout. You have killed but a piece of Him.

Except there, and there… Those bright spots on the ground. Splashes of the years you bled out of Him, coagulating puddles of days and droplets of hours. The trail leads away. *Not* dead. Not dead, after all. He merely sacrificed an aspect to end His agony and cover His escape.

You follow that trail, picking up speed. Spatters of His life-loss drip from the black rocks and quiver on the dirt like beads of mercury. He is wounded, hurt, haemorrhaging years in grisly quantities. If you had spilled so much lifetime, you would be dead, but lifetime is the only thing He has more of than you do.

He will be weak, though, dizzy, close to bleeding out unless He can tourniquet His leaking soul. Where does the trail lead? To the left, into the burned desolation of Macragge? No, the right–

You unfold yourself, and step into New Byzantium, just before the Panpacific annexation. The speckled trail leads into an echoing stretch of Calth's Underworld, then doubles back into the hull-wreck wastes of Tallarn, where you struggle to detect it in the blowing dust. You persevere, and track on between wind-blown longhouses on an island off pre-Strife Albia, where frightened faces watch you from behind rush shutters. The traces are clearer here, marking the grass. He hasn't been able to staunch the flow. How is He still standing? You see a wet handprint on a standing stone where He leaned to catch His breath.

You step into a longhouse, and into another facet. Crusade-era Davin. You look around the dim stone chamber, and bring *Worldbreaker* up. He will turn here, surely? This is a good place for an ambush, for the name itself has intrinsic power over you.

But no. Nothing. So you pull aside a curtain, and step into the rose-red colonnade of a Selenar compound on Luna. The fine chalcedony arcade is bathed in Earth-light and utterly silent. When is this? Before Unification? It doesn't matter. You–

He fells you from behind with a thought-blast, and as you roll and try to get up, He lifts you in a telekine vice and puts you through the colonnade wall. Quartz shatters. You land hard. Not so weak, then. Not so hurt.

He leaps at you through the hole torn in the wall, His war-sword swooping down. He nearly takes your arm off. You block His follow-up stroke with the head of your maul, and lash at Him with your Talon. He evades. His eyes light up, projecting twin beams of phosphorescent light that burn into your chest and slide you backwards across the quartz-littered floor until you ignite the eye on your breastplate and counter His power with some of your own. Your stream of roaring bloodlight entangles with His beams of white mindfire. Where they touch, the energies conflict in a vortical lesion where materia screams, and immateria bubbles and deforms. You take a step forward, driving your energy against His. He holds His ground, braced. You take another pace. The pitch of the energy scream increases.

Another step. The howling intensity reaches critical. A swathe of the immaterial fabric between you both annihilates, and the realspace threads woven through it explode. The shock-pulse knocks Him backwards, and shatters the facet of Luna around you. The violent fractal shift leaves you both in a dank, nameless cavern somewhere, with the fireball of the conflagration still dissipating between you.

You charge through those flames, maul raised. He throws another thought-blast at you to drive you back, but it's poorly

formed and merely grazes off your shields. *Worldbreaker* puts a sizzling dent in His refractors, so deep His ailing reactor surely cannot maintain function much longer.

He drives His war-sword through your left shoulder. You smack Him aside with your maul. His sword is wrenched out of you as He spins away, blood trailing from the fuller. Each impact is luring odd echoes out of the acoustics of the old cave, echoes that swim around the natural calcite columns, the dripping stone arches, and the crude handprints on the dim walls.

He turns, head low, and applies a stunning sequence of sword-strokes that He must surely have been taught by an aeldari autarch. You struggle to hold guard. You can't get past their lethal precision.

You need room to move. You are not limited by the four dimensions of materia. You have the numberless angles of the empyrean at your command.

You concoct an occulting aegis, and dodge sideways along the Twelfth Intersection of the Immaterial, weaving between thorn trees in the malnourished light to outflank Him. He sees you coming in His peripheral mindsight, and takes guard with His sword across the Sixty-sixth Oblique where the skull-coloured moon never sets, while carving some radiant sigil on the air with His claws, and propelling it at you along the Vale of Creatures, where barking, demented things writhe around you. You smash the screaming sigil with your maul before it touches you. It shatters like dry clay, and you smell the stink of Sigillite magic. Such feeble technique – the damned Sigillites were only ever dabblers, their amateur warpcraft unfit for full manipulation of the etheric.

But it was a decoy. The spearing fingers of His lightning claw splay wide and are, for an instant, webbed with squirming voltaics. Then the accumulated charge erupts from His palm and forks towards you. The jagged bolt strikes you, and you feel its fire in your marrow. You are thrown against a

limestone pillar, smoke and agony broiling off you in equal measure. His sword flashes down to decapitate you.

A killing cut, and a perfect one. You recognise it. It is exactly the peerless execution stroke that Sanguinius tried to deliver. Your father is showing you the tricks He taught His other son.

No matter.

The war-sword cuts the limestone as easily as a human throat. You have drawn realspace aside like a curtain and rolled out of the way. You drop from the ancient limestone cavern into an adjacent layer of the warp's fluid territories. You land on your feet and compose yourself, your limbs still aching from the touch of His lightning. You look around. You need to find a better facet in which to make a stand. You cross the keening Gulf of Lament, leaping along a long, narrow bridge of living flesh that throbs with febrile neuroplasticity and spans a bottomless aeonic pit.

But He has followed you, unfolding materia to pursue you across the interstices of dimensions to the brazen, screaming steps of the Bastion Stair in the realm of the red. He can track you somehow, catching your scent despite your efforts to ascend the rippling steps and evade through the Mists of Unreason, and then across the bleak plateau of the Blizzard of Forgetting.

He is drawing on all His gifts, many of them gifts He passed on to His sons. High below you, He is a bloodstained magician transfixing you with His baleful eye so that no pleat of reality can conceal you. A salvo of fireballs bursts from that malefic eye and they fly at you like blazing meteorites along every axis of the infinite planes. They are closing in on you, and will strike simultaneously. You cast a copy of yourself out of old shadows for them to target, and escape the ferocious detonation through a dilating gate of black bone that deposits you behind Him.

Then you cave in the back of His head with *Worldbreaker*.

But He has channelled the purest cunning. You have killed nothing more than a warpflux simulacrum, an effigy to draw you in. A false twin.

The real Him is deep above you, closing fast. You dart away into the Crook of Shadows, that dingy, slanting subdimension where nothing is upright and everything is corners. He is a hound at your heels, a loping wolf. He has assumed a lycanthropic aspect, and He has your spoor. His sword is an executioner's axe, His canines long, and He drags winter behind Him like a pelt.

You have no patience for such brute wrath, so you quickly weave a labyrinth to delay Him. As the wolf slows, confounded, you tie the labyrinth back upon itself to confuse Him, and remove its exits to entrap Him. How bitterly apt that He draws upon these atavistic qualities to gain advantage. They are old, tired traits He perfected long ago.

You, however, have changed and grown. Grown beyond Him. Your desire to walk down this path of glory, to achieve more than Him, to surpass Him and supersede Him, is a clear demonstration of your intent to reject His musty legacy. Others, your rivals, even your allies, have blamed this growth on your arrogance, on your pride. On *envy*, even. They've said it so much and so often, you've begun to believe it yourself.

But it's not true. You have done all you have done to escape His shadow. To be yourself, rather than a pale and lesser imitation. You are not some mewling by-blow infant, dumbly trying to copy everything its father does. You are not part of Him.

Everything you have achieved, from the unravelling of the Imperium, to the compliance of Terra and the overthrow of His Great Plan, you have done to validate your worth. And now, your absolute mastery of Chaos proves it, because that is something He either couldn't do, or feared to even try.

You are Horus Lupercal, ascendant instrument of Chaos. That accomplishment alone proves you are no puppet or inferior

copy. You used to be afraid of His power. Now His power is but a drop in your ocean.

You hear stone splintering and walls collapsing. He has taken the aspect of the great architect, and drawn a plan to escape your labyrinth, discerning the infinitesimal weaknesses where walls meet. He has taken the aspect of an obliterator, and broken through that weakness with etheric siege engines. He has taken the aspect of a swift and clever raven through the salt-caked and asymmetric chambers of the Drifting Castle, and the aspect of the steppe horseman to harness that raven's speed into fluid motion that shifts Him from the Eightieth Conjunction to the fever-meadows of Long Woe, and then around the vast and root-gnarled base of the towering Tree of Souls, to disguise His indirect route of attack.

He has taken on the predatory guile of a lion to hunt you along the wild shores of the Sea of Souls, and the fearless certainty of an avenging son to deliver final illumination.

He has a dynasty of aspects to draw upon, a bloodline of faces and meanings and talents.

What He can do, you can do better, because you can do anything. You take refuge in the mildewed Marcher Fortress that watches the stained margins of the Planes of Excess, and there take the aspect of terror, and flood the dark approaches of the Marches with dread, to slow His advance by creating a soulless tract of ice on which He will fear to tread. You close the living earth around you, forging tectonic bulwarks and walls of impassable furnace flame. You infect the rusted gates and the creaking sails of windmills with contagious sigils that buzz with crawling flies and reek of decomposition, that will communicate wasting death to any who look upon them. From the hymnals of the Neverborn, you take sonorous litanies, and sow their words across every angle. Your father will not abide a single syllable of those antiphonic chants. They will drive Him back. They will drive Him mad.

You nail a gladiator's agony into your heart, to gird yourself with its unquenchable rage. You now have the purest fury of

all with which to greet Him.

You wait, simmering. Just for good measure, you ready your execution stroke.

You wait.

You wait.

Your rage begins to cool. You wonder if you really need it. Do you need any of it? The flaming bulwark walls, the venerating litanies, the crucifying rage, the flyblown sigils of mortality? Surely you don't? You are Horus Lupercal. You have vowed to be your own man, and prove your own worth. You are not some chimerical combination of other souls. You don't need that. That's what your father does, and you despise His methods.

Don't be like Him.

Listen, the greatest satisfaction will come from beating Him as *you*. Think of it. Think of the pleasure that will bring you, the sweet, satiating delight of victory on your terms. You see? You can't deny it. That's what you want. That's what you crave.

You let the aspects slip away. You let the walls subside and the sigils expire. You silence the liturgical voices and let go of the rage.

You want to meet Him as yourself. The lingering satisfaction of–

Too late, you realise that He has taken the aspect of the seducer and neutered your defences with cloying temptation and indecency. Your father is a master of the aspects. He is, and always has been, an entire arcana. He has outplayed you.

So you change the game.

There is no time to prepare. He's almost on you. You know another arcana, and it's one that will distract Him, because it has always obsessed Him. As He bursts in on you, a brutal iron fist with overwhelming strength, you draw your hand up to meet Him.

Your opening hand. Just three cards in a classically simple Trionti spread.

The High Priest, still zealous despite his long exile, to curse your father's blood. Then *The Crone*, gibbering and milk-eyed, to entangle your father's mind with rancid, meaningless prophecies. Then *The Silver Door*, to shut Him out.

You have never set much store by cartomancy, but you are quite familiar with the tarot's symbols and their significances. The cards always seemed to you an imprecise method, the mummery of Sigillites and warlocks, sometimes effective in divination, but always so vague in their elastic meanings, and thus largely unreliable.

Now you have ascended as a psychic initiate, you have a new and ardent appreciation of their empyric function. They are sigils of imagination. Binding intuitive, non-verbal definitions to archetypes of the cosmos, the cards are a high and arcane art, capable of subtle interaction and piercing precognitive effect.

But here in your realm, awash with the warp, their symbology goes beyond mere precognition. Rather than interpreting outcomes, they can set them. They can determine the user's desired effect, and then manifest the cause to produce it. They are spurs to impel destiny to obey your will.

Your father has always been preoccupied with the cartomantic art. He constructed His own deck. You wonder if He has ever tried a reading in the warp.

You play Him at His own game.

In shock, He tries to disengage from the sticky cobweb of your opening spread. From His own deck, the grandiose Imperial Tarot, no less, He turns *The Pilgrim*, and utilises its questing agency to discern a path around the door you have locked in His face. A true pilgrim, in her devotion, will always reach the place she is supposed to be, no matter the length of the road, or the hardships of the journey.

You aggravate those hardships. You lay *The Hulk* of the major arcana across *The Silver Door*, and imprison Him in its lightless ruin. He has overcome *The Hulk* already, in His gruelling progress through the flagship to reach you, so you know full well it will not delay Him long a second time. But moments are enough for you to turn *The Galaxy*, to stretch distance between you, and *The Shatter'd World* to burn all His hope.

He reads the mutilation of the Throneworld and gasps in despair. In His deck, the psychoreactive wafers of *The Familia Humana, The Great Hoste* and *The Lords of Terra* burst into flames. You can smell His grief. He chokes as your spread forces Him to drink the dust of a vanquished planet. To twist that knife, you turn the more ambitious Antagonis spread: *The Justiciar* to weigh and punish His crimes, *The Maison Dieu* to reinforce your Court and purify the righteousness of your dispute against Him, *The Mond Primitif* to bleed more centuries from His wounded soul and sap His perpetual vigour, and *The Lord of Swords* to arm yourself.

His desperation increases. Some of these archetypes are old or obscure, and do not appear in His prized deck, so He has no counterparts to lay against them, to subvert them. He divines the danger He is in. He turns another card face up. He becomes *The Fortress of Faith*, impervious. You become *The Lightning Tower* to tear the fortress down. He quickly draws the wild card *The Harlequin* to choreograph an escape from that fiery fate. Its dance is lithe and acrobatic, but it barely carries Him clear of the plummeting stonework.

He lands like a felid, drops to a crouch, and counters with a warding hand, the Peerpoint spread, all symbols of concordia. *The Battleship* for positive control of power, *The Rogue Trader* to harness luck and anchor favourable fortune, and *Astarte* for protection.

You respond with discordia, and discard His careful spread. You lay *The Daemon* inverted across *The Battleship*, and His power ebbs. Then you lay *The Daemon* inverted across *The*

Rogue Trader, and His luck runs out. Then you lay *The Daemon* inverted, across *Astarte*, and His protection is lost.

You have made a deck of your own. While you waited in the Court for Him to arrive, you had time on your hands, all the time you wanted. You constructed this Empyreal Tarot by hand, while the Old Four whispered suggestions for the images that might appear on the psychoreactive wafers. No two decks are the same. Yours is full of daemons.

You lay more of them. A double Peerpoint spread. Then a spread askew across them, in the style known as Mortalite. Ranks of *The Daemon*, marching side by side. Cards burn in His hands, consumed before He can lay them. You turn the *Eight of Pentacles*, and they scourge Him from all angles. You turn *The Revenger* to guard your back, and *The Occulted Orphan* to blind His mindsight and signify the final severance of your blood from His. He looks aghast. You turn, just for the fun of it, *The Dark King* to remind Him of His hideous overreach and fatal ambition. He recoils from it, unwilling to even look at it, and tries *The Assassin* to strike at you. But *The Revenger* is waiting, and runs *The Assassin* through.

Your *Exterminatus* cancels His *Illumination*. His *Aquila* and *Knight of Concordia*, along with His *The Magos*, are engulfed in the purgation of your *Neverness*. Your *Dreadful Sagittary* slays His *Steadfast Angel* for a second time.

It is not your father's power, it's what He does with it. And He can do *nothing*. He is the beginner here, the amateur, and He has no control over the few cards remaining in His hand.

He understands that the cards have turned against Him. He decides to flee from the tangible destiny that you have spread before Him, and which you fully control. He starts to hammer upon *The Silver Door* to find a way out.

Thus far, you have each made turns on face value, employing the simplest and most literal interpretations. But the cards have deeper, subtler meanings, most not obvious to a novice like Him. *Death*, for example, that ominous card, is seldom death, but rather represents a more general negation or ending. *The*

Ragged Fool is often far from foolishness and whimsy, but signifies a seeking innocence or even a purity of trust.

The same is true of the next wafer you select. You turn a card, *Despoiler*.

Like *Death*, it is an apparently sinister card, and many fear it, but in truth it manifests a singularly neutral and controlled power. Its iconography represents an abrupt shift, a sudden and unforeseen reversal of fortune. Imperial readers usually perceive this to be a drastic change to the detriment of the Imperium. But it is only that if you want it to be.

You *want* it to be. You make it your emblem.

You lay it, askew, across *The Silver Door*. *Despoiler* unlocks that door very suddenly as He tries to break through it. You are face to face.

Worldbreaker catches Him in the throat and cheek, twists His head sideways in a spray of blood, and drops Him to the deck.

His cards spill around Him. There are only a few of them left, the other wafers burned. You see *The Guardsman, The Throne, The Space Marine, The Knight of Mandatio*, *The Lantern* and *Revelation*. A weak reading, of ill fortune, and in disarray.

Little good will it do Him. The Emperor must die.

PART TEN

HERE IS WHERE IT WILL END

10:i

Never too late

No matter how many times he sorts the cards, the sorcerer keeps getting the same reading. The darkness of the collection has drawn in so tight, it feels as though the four of them are occupying a small tent of night's blackness, lit by the single light above the table. Even that is beginning to fade. The rest of the collection is lost from view, if it is even still there at all.

They gather around the reading table and watch. Since he turned *Despoiler*, Ahriman has assayed a variety of spreads: the Leonormal, the Peerpoint, Zeeker's, the Trionti, Mortaliti, the Roche Exegesis, along with a number of more abstract schemes that lack recognisable symmetry or pattern, and don't seem deliberate at all.

Each time, the result is identical.

The Daemon, The Daemon, The Daemon, The Daemon…

'Why this repetition?' Sindermann asks. He pulls in the only other chair, and tentatively sits facing Ahriman, staring at the cards as they turn. Fear still clings to him, both fear of the Prosperine warlock and of their plight in general, but it has been tempered by intent academic curiosity.

'Because that is all there is to read, Kyril Sindermann,' Ahriman replies, his voice a soft hiss.

'This is not something you're doing?'

'Of course not. Why would you think so?'

'Because you've made your cards perform all manner of tricks,' Sindermann replies. He reaches out to touch one of the cards.

'Don't,' says Ahriman.

‘Will it disturb the reading?’ Sindermann asks, glancing up at Ahriman as he anxiously withdraws his hand.

‘You’ll die,’ replies Ahriman. His skull gleams beneath the ghost of his flesh.

Sindermann swallows and nods.

‘B-but if the reading is changing the cards… How does that work?’ Sindermann asks, shaken by his unwitting brush with death. ‘These wafers are objective tools of analysis. What they read may change. But why does what they read change *them*?’

‘It is a little late in the life of your civilisation to start learning such things,’ Ahriman responds, shuffling again.

‘It’s never too late,’ Sindermann insists.

Ahriman shrugs. His eyes glow like blue lamps in the deep sockets of his skull.

‘Well then,’ he says. ‘We are within the warp, and within the warp, there is no linear sequence. No before and after. Effect can prompt cause. What is being read can determine its reading.’

He draws again.

‘Is this true of all… *things* in the warp?’ Mauer asks nervously, unwilling to say the word.

Staring down at another spread of *The Daemon*, Ahriman nods.

‘Crudely, yes,’ he says. ‘From a material, linear perspective, a daemon may die long before it is born. It is a loop, an eddy, an ouroboros cycle, that is alive and unliving simultaneously.’

‘How is a daemon born?’ Sindermann asks.

‘I th-thought you wanted to know how to k-kill one?’ the archivist murmurs at his shoulder.

‘That too.’ Sindermann nods. He looks across the table at the sorcerer. ‘So?’

‘What you refer to as a daemon, Kyril Sindermann, is in fact…’ Ahriman trails off. ‘I’ll keep it simple. Daemons are not born. Not ever. But they start, and sometimes end. In layman’s terms, the Neverborn are vibrations of immateria, a small part of the aeternal whole suddenly given focus and discernible form in response to a negative material event. A death, for instance. An ending. An infamy. A massacre. Grief. Pain… Anything that emanates a fiercely adverse emotional vibration.’

‘A murder *here* creates a daemon *there*?’ Sindermann asks.

‘We are all *there* currently, but yes. A powerful, violent occurrence in realspace produces a reactive coalescence in the warp. Like a small flask of lead lifted from a molten mass and suddenly cast and cooled into a solid form. And the more violent, abrupt and heinous the crime, the stronger the reciprocal formation. The most powerful Neverborn are often the product of something unnecessary, something especially cruel or vindictive. What you might consider unexpected, or shockingly wrong, breeds the foulest echoes.’

‘So, an outrage? An atrocious act?’ asks Mauer in a whisper.

‘Indeed.’

‘So what is happening here?’ asks Sindermann, gesturing towards the latest spread, but careful not to touch the wafers.

‘It would seem,’ the sorcerer replies, ‘something quite inhumanly wicked.’

10:ii

The captain and the Praetorian

Somehow, Constantin keeps going. He keeps walking and not dying. Dorn has never known a man so grievously injured stay upright, let alone walk, but then he has never known a man like the captain-general.

In fact, Dorn reflects, he has never really known Valdor at all. Not him, nor any of his illustrious Legio. They are a breed apart, born of a different tradition and different technologies, products of a different age. Though their aims and loyalties mesh with those of Dorn, his brothers and their sons, the warriors of the Legio Custodes are a different lineage entirely. They are the last and greatest warriors of their time, the martial pinnacle of the Unification Era, now eclipsed by the new epoch of primarchs and gene-sons.

Dorn knows there is old rancour there. There always has been. Constantin, with his eternally saturnine disposition, has never even tried to disguise his feelings towards the primarch sons and their Astartes offspring. It's not jealousy, or even resentment. It's doubt, a grave uncertainty, a wary lack of faith in the new instruments that have been fashioned to supplant his kind.

Throne knows, this war has proven those doubts correct.

Constantin has never questioned his king's decision to establish the primacy of Dorn and his brothers. He never would, but only, Dorn believes, because Constantin's loyalty is forged from quite different materials. The loyalty of the primarchs and the Astartes was a blood loyalty, visceral and primal, passionate and tempestuous. It was a loyalty that could conquer the galaxy, but it was also emotional and volatile.

Oh, *how* volatile.

The loyalty of the Legio Custodes has always been a different mettle. It is as cold and permanent as adamantine. There is fury in it, but no unstable passion. It is silent and unquestioning. Dorn believes that Constantin has never questioned his king's decision to enact the supremacy of the primarchs, because Constantin doesn't know *how* to question. The ability to do so was never wired into him, a consequence of a particular brand of loyalty that he was armed with. Merely to question would be alien to his innate character.

Dorn *does* know him, of course. They have worked closely, fought shoulder to shoulder, trusted each other. During the siege, they were two of the handful that kept the Palace whole. Dorn likes to think that he, of all the primarch sons, has earned Constantin's grudging respect, and that, of all the primarch sons, his character is the most closely aligned to Constantin's unyielding loyalty. They would die for each other.

But they are not close. They are not friends. They do not share the bond, however volatile, of brothers. They are, at best, inevitable comrades.

Dorn wonders if Constantin, or any of the Custodes, are even capable of being close to another person. He suspects that friendship, like the capacity to question, is simply extraneous to them, incompatible with their frame of being.

Even so, they would die for each other. In the next short while, they undoubtedly will.

Dorn tries to shake off these thoughts. He knows he is helplessly dwelling in the past. Those centuries of isolation in the red desert forced his mind to circle ever inwards upon itself, like the concentric walls of a keep or the loops of some maze without entrance or exit, obsessing over what had been, for the memory of what had been was the only thing he had left. Now he can't break free of those recursive thoughts. It is as if the bitter hail of the past assails him, the moments lost and the chances missed, rather than the teeth of this biting gale.

But this gale is a neverness storm, of unparalleled wrath. It probably *is* the past, for time has been cut loose from its moorings. It feels like the actual past, transmuted to elemental fury, unleashed to assault him.

He has no idea how much ground they have covered. Visibility is almost nothing. From the steep and ragged incline of the terrain, he believes they have skirted the end of the fallen orbital plate and are now ascending the ridge of broken rock, the rim of the crater that the vast tonnage of the orbital plate made when it impacted.

They have left the battle, the raging insanity, behind them.

But progress is slow. The rocks are steep, loose and treacherous. The tempest is in their faces, driving rain at them. And Constantin is too badly mauled to move at any speed.

He is limping at Dorn's heels, using his spear as a staff to support him. The manner of this painfully reminds Dorn of the Sigillite and his clacking, halting progress around the Throne Room. Another melancholy memory.

Several times, Dorn turns to offer Constantin his hand, or support the captain-general over some especially stubborn obstacle. Every time he does, Constantin shakes him off, or fixes him with a scowl of such contempt that Dorn withdraws his hand.

'Damn you!'

'You're hurt. Let me help you.'

'Damn your help.'

By Dorn's estimation, they are slowly closing on the crest of the ridge. The higher they scramble, the stronger the assault of the storm whipping over the rim. There is nothing to see, except pelting rain, black rock and billowing vapour. There is nothing to see except the storm.

But that's enough. A target to aim for, a cross to mark their destination. The main body of the storm's formation, an atmospheric monster so low it threatens to crush the land, is a

colossal black vortex of circling cloud. The heart of that whirlpool, the baleful eye, is strung with lightning, a flashing, sparking marker they can fix on in the murk. Valdor has decided that it is the place. That eye marks the site of his king's last stand. Dorn believes it too. If the rain streaming off his plate is truly the past, then it echoes with his father's voice.

Dorn hears a sound behind him, a clatter and slither of rocks. He turns in time to see Constantin overbalancing, pitching backwards as washed-out stone gives way and he loses his footing.

Dorn reaches out instinctively. He grabs Constantin's wrist and prevents a fall that, at the very least, would have compounded the captain-general's already critical injuries.

This time, Constantin does not shake him off. Dorn hauls him up the vicious incline onto more stable rock. They cower together for a moment in the lee of a heavy boulder, shielded from the brunt of the gale. Torrents of rainwater stream and splash down the slope on either side of them.

'Stay here,' Dorn says.

'Damn you.'

'Stay here, Constantin. You're hurt.'

'Damn you, seventh son.'

Dorn glares at him. He doesn't know why Constantin's prodigious metabolism isn't healing him faster. Has it ceased to function in this un-place of un-time, or is he actually hurt so severely it has overwhelmed his body's capacity to repair itself?

'Just stay here and gather your wits while I scout ahead,' Dorn exclaims over the shriek of the storm. 'I'll go to the crest of the ridge, and see what's beyond. I'll come back–'

'Damn you,' Constantin snorts. 'I can walk.' The pallor of his face and the pain in his eyes suggest he cannot.

'Constantin–'

‘I’m not going to retire from the field, Praetorian. Not now. Damn you.’

They stare at each other.

‘Very well, captain-general.’

Dorn gets to his feet. He offers his hand to Valdor. Valdor regards it with scorn for a moment, as though considering how best to sever it. Then he clasps it and permits Dorn to hoist him up.

Once upright, Valdor pushes on ahead, levering his way on his spear, leaving Dorn behind.

‘Damn you too,’ Dorn yells after him, and struggles to follow.

At the crest of the ridge, the gale is so intense, they are barely able to crawl over the rock.

But on the far side, there is an abrupt calm.

The storm still howls above them. Rain patters on the rocks, and they are buffeted by the wind. But the far side of the ridge seems to lead down into the eerie stillness beneath the storm’s eye, as though the broken ridgeline and the high ground around them is lifting the storm’s force away, like a lid, preventing it from scouring the land beneath.

They pick their way down the far slope. They are overlooking a vast depression, a basin as wide, grey and profound as a lunar sea. It is encircled by a crown of glowering rocks, and capped by the screaming spiral of the neverness storm.

The slope becomes shallower, and turns into scree and a tumbled boulder field. The light is fulminous and yellow, a weird and sickly cast streaked by the rain. There is something out in the centre of the basin, a structure protruding from the ground several kilometres away, directly beneath the lightning-ribboned eye of the cyclone.

They make their way towards it. Vapour fumes like mist. From a distance, the structure looks like a ruined bastion, like

Hasgard or Gorgon Bar, or a tower felled by lightning. Then Dorn begins to understand what he's looking at.

It is the upper decks and bridge levels of a battleship's stern castle. Decayed and dilapidated, the grim carcass is jutting from the grey mire, drunkenly askew, like the unsubmerged portion of a ship foundered in an ocean swell. The huge shape, a monolith of neglect, is surrounded by a necklace of ruins, and a wide, washed-up litter of debris. Bright lightning forks down at the towering wreck out of the storm's maelstrom eye above, each flash a shivering artillery boom, and wreathes the upper turrets, broken antennae arrays and shield masts in luminous garlands of corposant.

'Gloriana class,' mutters Dorn. 'The *Vengeful Spirit*.'

'Just a part we can see,' murmurs Constantin, limping up beside him and leaning on his spear to look.

Dorn glances at him.

'This is all the *Vengeful Spirit*,' Valdor says. 'This place. All of it. It is. And it isn't.'

He pauses.

'That's just a part we're allowed to see,' he says, as though everything he has just said makes perfect sense. Dorn is disquieted to realise it does.

'Allowed?' asks Dorn.

'*Able*, then,' Constantin replies. He shrugs. 'And that's where we go.'

Dorn realises he can hear something. Not the painful crack of the lightning, or the drizzle of the rain, not the rush of the wind across the basin or the deep howl of the storm above. He can hear… Impacts. Metal striking metal. Weapon against plate. The steady, studied syncopation of intense combat.

It's very distant.

Valdor lifts his spear and starts to walk towards the ship unassisted. He glances over his shoulder at the ridge they

descended. Dorn knows what he's looking for, what he hopes to see.

'Will they come?' Dorn asks. 'Your men. Will they–'

'If any of them are still alive,' replies Constantin, 'they will come this way. Coros and the others, any of them. I gave them my directive. They know where to come.'

'Do you… sense them?' asks Dorn.

Constantin shakes his head. He looks at Dorn, wary.

'You have not spoken about the Blood Angels, seventh son,' he says.

'No,' says Dorn.

'Any idea…?'

'None at all,' says Dorn. 'Whatever had befallen the brothers of the Ninth, whatever horror…' He pauses, chilled by the memory. 'To see Raldoron like that. I don't know. Perhaps the treason of Chaos has taken them too. But it seemed more like–'

'Vengeance,' says Constantin quickly. 'Rage.'

Dorn nods. A rage so great and inconceivable, it had turned them into monsters.

'I think maybe so, Constantin,' he replies. 'A rage fuelled by the extremity of loss.'

He looks at Valdor.

'Sanguinius is dead,' he says.

Valdor doesn't answer. His chin moves pugnaciously, as though he is chewing a word.

'My brother is dead,' says Dorn, 'killed by my brother. By Lupercal.'

'How do you know this?' Valdor asks quietly.

'I was told it,' says Dorn. 'I believe it. And if Raldoron and his kin felt it… and I fear they must have, then…'

Valdor nods, then looks away at the distant ridge.

‘So,’ says Dorn. He raises Diamantis’ blade and looks at it. ‘This, I will take to that hulk, and this, I will bury in my brother’s heart.’

He starts to walk again.

‘He was…’ Valdor begins.

Dorn stops, and looks back at him.

‘I had time for him,’ says Valdor. ‘For Sanguinius. He was… I could not help but like him, Rogal, though I tried my best not to.’ He looks at Dorn, and manages a grim half-smile. ‘As I do with most of your lot.’

Dorn nods. ‘A fine requiem. From you.’

They walk another kilometre or so, and reach the edge of the debris field surrounding the vast wreck. There are ruins here too, nameless stone forms and half-buried arches pushing up out of the rain-soaked clay. They advance.

Something shifts ahead of them. A pair of wide, stone arches, their tops barely visible above the clay, stir. Then they start to rise, dripping, rippling the wet clay as they suck and slide from its embrace.

They are not stone, and they are not arches. When they rise clear of the sodden ground, they are revealed as long, wide horns, recurved and down-tipped like those of an auroch. They are each five metres long. They sprout, symmetrically, from the low and deep brow that follows them, a brow that caps a huge skull, a skull that tops a neck, bulwark-thick, a neck that leans from massive hunched shoulders.

The Neverborn is titanic. It hauls its vast, humanoid shape out of the oozing ground like some undead thing rising from a shallow grave. Its pelt is matted with wet clay. Its fingers claw furrows in the ground as it pulls itself upright. It frees and plants one cloven hoof, and straightens up. Its head is the grinning skull of a horse or stag. Its eyes blaze with the same lightning that sears across the sky. It opens its mouth, and it

roars, a dry shriek that blasts like a hurricane and lifts a wave of water droplets from the ground.

It lopes towards them. The earth shakes. Dorn breaks into a run, moving to the right, sword raised to strike as he comes in at it. He can't see Valdor. Water vapour coils and smokes around the beast, thrown up by the violence of its motion. It seems to ignore Dorn. It is bearing down on something. Dorn can't see Valdor in the spume. Is he moving too slowly? Is he the easy target? Can he not move out of its path swiftly enough?

Is he, the damn fool, standing his ground to meet it?

The Neverborn shrieks again. It strikes. A huge arm brings a huge fist down in a huge splash of liquid clay from the waterlogged ground. It pulls its fist out of the ooze. The blow has left a deep, puckered crater surrounded by radiating splats of jetted clay.

He can't see Valdor. Dorn can't see Valdor any more.

The Neverborn shrieks again, a shriek that echoes around the rim of the ridgeline. It swings around and makes for Dorn. The ground shudders. Dorn turns out wide, trying to control his angle and make an assault from the flank. He chooses his target.

They slam together. The spray is so great, Dorn is blinded by it. His feet slide in the slime. He aims for the knee. His blade tears matted flesh, but reflects off hard bone. He is glanced aside.

He rolls hard, knowing the beast will grab for him.

It misses with its urgent lunge, and thumps another puckered pit in the wet ground. Dorn tries to rise. His feet slip. He is plastered with clay. He swings again, and rips the blade through the meat of a thigh. There's a squeal.

Then he's flying backwards, dazed by the concussion of something hitting his chest like a siege-ram.

Dorn lands, and rolls several times, lifting spray.

He tries to rise. The Neverborn is coming at him, a splashing thunder that will run him down. His sword is wedged in the mud, hilt up. Dorn heaves it free. He turns to thrust it at the thing bearing down on him.

There's a flash of gold in the rain. Something glints as it punches through the beast's neck.

It staggers aside, hooves mauling the clay and skidding in the ooze, clutching at its throat. Its maw is open, but no shriek comes out.

It falls heavily, on its side, raising a wall of drizzle and quaking the ground. Its legs kick and spasm, shiver, slump. Its arms twitch and go slack.

Valdor limps past Dorn. He goes up to the dead mass, and grabs the haft of his spear protruding from the plastered throat. He pauses, gripping tight, and mutters something, a name, perhaps. Then he wrenches the spear out.

He limps back to Dorn.

'When we get there,' he says, 'let me do it. Let me kill him.'

'Constantin–'

'I don't know what it is to have a brother, Rogal,' says Valdor. 'But if I had one, I don't think I'd like to kill him. You don't want that blood on your hands, or that guilt in your memory. I'll do it without sentiment.'

He's lying, of course. Dorn knows it. There would be sentiment. Constantin wants vengeance. He would never admit it, but Sanguinius' death has distressed him.

'Let's see who gets there first,' says Dorn.

'Let's get there together,' Valdor says.

Dorn sniffs, then nods.

'We rise together, we fall together,' he replies. 'If that's all we can do, then it is enough.'

Valdor glances back the way they have come, one last time. There is still no sign of anyone following, no trace of Diocletian Coros or any surviving Sentinels.

No traces of Abaddon either, Dorn reassures himself. But he can see the disappointment on Valdor's face.

'I sent a warning,' he tells Valdor. 'A call to arms. Before I joined you, I put out a call to any forces that could join us. My full authority. Some may be coming.'

'By what means?' Valdor asks.

'I sent a messenger.'

'Who?'

'It doesn't matter,' says Dorn. 'I met a single soul, so I sent them back for help.'

'Do you trust them?' Valdor asks.

'I had to,' says Dorn. 'There was no one else.'

10:iii

The voice of stone

The woman steps in from the dingy grey courtyard through the cell door, looks around the gloomy cell block, and then steps back into the yard. She does this several times, fascinated.

Marshal Agathe watches her. The woman seems young to her, not much more than a girl, really. She's dirty. Her black clothes are torn and caked in dust, and her dark hair is tangled and unkempt. She looks like some hapless urchin who's been living in the bomb-wastes of Anterior for the past few weeks.

But despite her presentation, and her youth, there's something about her manner. She has the bearing of command, and it's more than just the heavy auramite seal she carries.

The woman turns around in the shadows of the cell block again, and then returns to the dismal grey air of the yard.

'As you can see–' Agathe begins.

'A tear between material and immaterial,' the woman says. 'A splice. This courtyard lies within one realm, and that–' She gestures at the cell door. 'And that lies in another, adjacent.'

'You don't seem disturbed by this,' Agathe remarks.

The woman looks at her.

'I've encountered one before, marshal,' she says. 'More than one, in all likelihood. I've just never seen one so precisely delineated before. They are usually blurred and gradual. This is quite dramatically clean and sharp.'

'Who did you say you were?' Agathe asks.

'Katerina Moriana,' the woman replies. 'I bear the authority of the Praetorian.' There's something odd about the way she says her name. Over-enunciated. It doesn't feel like she is making an effort to ensure Agathe understands it. It feels more

like she's, what…? Getting used to it? Testing it out? Reminding herself?

Agathe's had enough truck with names in the past few days. Mikhail and his men. People don't seem to have enough names, or real ones. It's a defence mechanism, and one she can appreciate.

Agathe glances aside as Mikhail walks into the yard from the lane beyond. Agathe can hear a sporadic chatter of small-arms fire from the drab, ramshackle streets of the alien city behind him.

'Traitor Excertus,' he reports. 'I've got the approach streets and alleys covered, but their numbers are increasing. I'll need more men.'

'I've sent for them,' Agathe replies.

'Merudin,' the woman says to Mikhail. 'Merudin Twentieth Tactical. From the Lupercal's own support companies.'

'They're *what*?' Agathe asks.

The woman ignores her.

'The Merudin are vicious and well trained, captain,' she says to Mikhail. 'But they are currently in disarray. Distressed and close to panic.'

'Aren't we all?' Mikhail replies calmly.

'Accurate marksmanship and thorough suppressive fire will keep them at bay.'

'Good to know,' Mikhail says.

'For now, at least,' the woman says. 'Marshal?'

She turns and walks back into the cell block. Agathe glances at Mikhail.

'Get to it,' she says. He nods.

'Grace of the Throne go with you,' Agathe calls after him. She follows the woman inside.

The cell block is dark and quiet. The smell of the air, the temperature, even the air pressure, seem different. Agathe still can't get used to the state-change of stepping through that doorway. The woman is already striding away down the dark stone hall.

She looks back at Agathe.

'This place. What is it?' she asks.

Agathe shrugs, catching her up.

'A stronghold,' she says. 'The best we could find in the circumstances. An abandoned prison, we think. There are no distinguishing landmarks in the area.'

'And where is it?'

'Within five kilometres of the Metome Processional,' Agathe replies. 'As far as I can judge.'

'So… The south-western Palatine?'

Agathe takes a breath. 'Listen, ma'am–'

'Katerina Moriana.'

'Yes. It's important that you understand… We could be anywhere. We have no reference or bearing. We could be hundreds of kilometres away from… from anywhere we might think we are.'

'And it's changing all the time,' Moriana says. 'I understand. Thank you. What are your strengths?'

'I have about three thousand men–'

'We'll be taking them through that doorway, marshal,' Moriana says. 'That cell doorway, into the city beyond. An emergency relief force. You need to have them mobilised and ready to move as soon as your captain has secured the immediate streets and driven the Merudin back. Do you have vox?'

'Now wait,' says Agathe. 'With all due respect to that seal of office you keep waving under my nose, that's not going to

happen.'

'The Emperor is in the gravest danger, marshal. The Praetorian has called for support, without delay, from any and all forces that can answer that call. This command supersedes any orders you may have. It is the only thing that matters any more.'

'I understand what you're saying, Katerina Moriana,' Agathe begins.

They step back as Phikes marches four squads of the 403rd past to reinforce Mikhail outside. The adjutant glances uneasily at Moriana as he goes by.

'Take them to Captain Mikhail, Phikes,' Agathe tells him as he passes. 'Then get back here.'

'Yes, marshal.'

Agathe looks back at the woman. Moriana has turned away to examine the damp black stone of the walls.

'Listen,' Agathe says. 'I have three thousand or so men, but less than a third of them are actual combat troops. The Antioch Miles Vesperi are the best equipped. The Four Hundred and Third Exigency Stratiotes are solid men, but they're little more than a scratch company. The rest are auxiliaries, gun crews, loaders–'

'The Emperor is in the gravest danger,' Moriana repeats, without looking around. 'All who can answer the call will answer the call, no matter their station–'

'You're not listening,' Agathe snaps. 'I said listen. This is essentially an artillery unit. We have field guns. A lot of fields guns. That's our main proportion. We're long-range support. We are not an infantry group, and we are ill-suited to mount any kind of mobile expeditionary offensive.'

'Artillery is good,' says Moriana. 'Field guns. Bring those.'

Agathe sighs.

'Have you ever fought a war, ma'am?' she asks.

‘Not like this one,’ Moriana replies.

‘Right,’ says Agathe. ‘Let me lay it out for you. We have virtually no support weapons. No armour support. Just a modest number of men that could pass as infantry. We have the field guns, but they are heavy, and so are their munition carts. We have no tractors, or motorised limbers. We simply can’t manhandle those guns down here and out into that yard, let alone lug them through the city beyond. We can be reasonably effective dug-in in a place like this and shelling at range. Not on the move.’

The woman seems to consider this. She starts walking again.

‘Show me,’ she says.

Agathe sets off after her.

‘You have vox?’ Moriana asks.

‘Yes. It doesn’t work. Nothing works.’

They pass through a broken blast-door system and climb the black steps towards the surface level. The woman stops and examines the wall again. She runs her fingers across the black stone.

‘We think it used to be a prison,’ Agathe says, waiting for her. ‘Someone said the Blackstone, but–’

‘Black stone,’ says Moriana.

‘Well, as I say, it can’t be that, because the damn Blackstone is in–’

‘Black stone,’ Moriana says again. She slides her palm across the dripping wall. ‘Noctilith. It is a rare and unusual material with curious properties. It is often used to suppress or dampen psychic activity. That’s why the prison was made of it.’

‘How do you know that?’

‘I’ve always been inquisitive,’ the woman replies.

They carry on up the steps, cross the entry hall, and step outside. The air’s hot, and it stinks. Nothing has changed since

the last time Agathe was out here. The gunlines, now dug-in, wait with barrels elevated, facing the mauled wasteland of mud and rubble beyond. The crews huddle, anxious, in the firing pits and hasty trenchworks, or cluster around the ammunition wagons. There is a lonely ache of anticipation and fear. The trackless, mangled waste stretches away as far as they can see, and is eventually lost in the deep, black curtain of ash and smoke that rings the tattered horizon. The sky is low, black as night, and swollen with dirt-clouds. From the distance, beyond the obscuring haze of ash, comes the thump and roar of an armour engagement that seems to have been going on forever.

Moriana surveys the scene, then turns and looks at the scowling hulk of the black mansion.

‘I appreciate the logistical impediments you have outlined, marshal,’ she says. ‘I am, however, charged with an imperative to gather and summon support. I gave the Praetorian my word. I need to establish contact with any units in range. With loyalist command. With the Sanctum. With *anything*. There really isn’t much time, and nothing else matters now. You have no vox?’

‘The ’casters are dead,’ says Agathe.

Phikes has reappeared. He stands in the mansion doorway, keeping a respectful and wary distance.

‘Phikes?’ Agathe calls.

‘Marshal.’

‘Try the vox again. And keep trying it.’

Phikes hesitates, then nods.

‘In the remote chance that you get it working or establish a contact,’ Moriana calls to him, ‘inform me immediately. I will compose the message to send.’

Phikes gives her a dangerous look, then hurries off to the signal trench. Moriana walks back inside the mansion, with Agathe at her heels.

‘Contact is the key thing,’ Moriana says, her voice pulling echoes from the dank, thick walls. Water drips. ‘A general call to action.’

She looks around, studying the place. Agathe notices an odd affect in the way the woman looks. She seems to tilt her whole head to examine things, rather than shifting her gaze.

‘I could…’ Agathe says, with an almost helpless shrug, ‘send runners. Maybe some would get through…’

‘No one would get through,’ says Moriana. ‘But there might be an alternative. With your permission.’

‘It doesn’t feel like you need it,’ says Agathe.

‘I mean to say, marshal, that you might find it unsettling. Be prepared to calm your men if they become disturbed.’

‘Disturbed by what?’

‘Noctilith,’ says Moriana, looking up at the wall, her hand against it. ‘It’s psychoreactive, as I said. Ordinarily, it is used for dampening, and it’s highly effective in that role. But here, wherever here is, the binding sigils and restraints of warding that made this place a prison for body and mind have been destroyed.’

She scrapes her toe through the splintered fragments of stone covering the floor, pieces of frieze and wall decorations torn down or blown away, their purpose no longer identifiable.

‘Noctilith absorbs psychic energy. It soaks it up. Unconstrained, and without the proper wards, it can also act as a resonator.’

‘Like an echo chamber?’ Agathe asks.

‘Like an amplifier,’ says Moriana.

Moriana faces the dank wall. She sets her hands flat against it and bows her head.

‘I suggest you stand back,’ she says quietly.

For a moment, nothing happens. A long moment. Agathe waits. The woman doesn't move. Agathe feels a little awkward just standing there. It's getting warm. There's sweat on her back. The pseudoflesh patch on her cheek starts to itch. She decides to step outside for a moment.

Then the whispers come. The scratching. The tapping. The echoes of knocks and scrapes from unseen things haunting the shadows of the black mansion's empty block-rows, cells and vaults. Lost souls. Ghosts. Memories. Something is agitating them. The knocking grows louder and more insistent, coming from a score of directions. Agathe's collar feels tight. Her heart rate rises. Her clothes don't seem to fit properly any more. Things scurry and scuttle in her peripheral vision.

She feels the clammy, warm touch of sorcery on her skin. It is a unique and unpleasant sensation she hasn't felt since she stood with great Raldoron, and Naranbaatar and his Stormseers at Colossi, in the grip of the magic of the Thousand Sons.

It is a touch she had hoped she'd never have to feel again.

Echoes swirl around her, swelling from the black stone walls. Her skin prickles and her guts churn. She hears a voice. The woman's voice. But Katerina Moriana's mouth is not moving.

+Sons and daughters of the Imperium of Man. Rise now. Rise up. By the command of the Praetorian, take up your weapons and advance. The Emperor stands alone, at the hour of greatest peril. Take up your weapons and come to His aid. Protect Him as He protects you. You are the shield of humanity! Rise together and stand as one. Stand at His side now, or all is lost. Terra must endure. The Imperium must stand. Horus Lupercal must fall. The Emperor must live.+

Dead, the black stone lives. It finds its voice.

10:iv

Witnesses at the execution

You lift your father up. He's hurt. Limp. Necrosis is blackening parts of His soul and mind. Flecks of His cracked plate spill away as you move Him, flakes of gold. Years pour out of Him from a dozen wounds and spatter the deck.

This is the hard part. The bad part. There's no shame in admitting it. A fair fight is one thing, two warriors matched and pitted. But the execution, once one is defeated and helpless? There's nothing to relish in that. It was the same with the Angel. Nothing to savour. Just the grimly inevitable punctuation to an otherwise glorious contest.

But the crowd wants it, of course. They're baying for blood. You can hear their red howls ringing through the obsidian walls of your Court. And the four want it, the Old Four. They've *always* wanted it.

You look over at them.

They nod their assent. The Emperor must die.

Leetu kills another of the snarling scavenger things. *Mourn-It-All* cleaves its drooling snout so deeply that its head is wrenched around, and the Neverborn flops backwards on itself, its limbs in spasm.

The others shrink back, screeching and hissing. Perhaps they're scared of him at last? The threat of his blade has finally outweighed their desire to feed. It's taken long enough. He's heaped the deck with their corpses.

He sinks to his knees, aching with exertion, covered in splashes of daemon ichor. Sanguinius' corpse is cold at his side.

They’re not shrinking from him. He sees that now. Something else has caused them to quail and retreat, to cackle and whine. Something much more dangerous than a Space Marine with a sword.

Leetu looks over his shoulder. He was so caught up in the frenzy of his fight with the carrion eaters, he had not realised that the real fight was over.

A hundred metres away, across the creased and punctured deck, Horus stands over the Emperor.

The Master of Mankind is sprawled on His side, twisted. Smoke drifts lazily from the dents and cracks of His golden plate. There is so much blood. How could Leetu not have heard the crash of that giant figure falling? The brute Warmaster, looming over his father, is wounded too, but he seems oblivious to the gouges and furrows that tatter the Serpent’s Scales. He flexes his vast shoulders, easing the tension accumulated during the duel. His bloodlit face seems pensive, almost sad, as he regards his father’s body.

But there is a hint of that deafening smile too.

The Lupercal Court is slowly reasserting itself, drawing back into form now the fight is done. Its shadows and psychofractal blackness are gradually replacing the *Vengeful Spirit*’s chamber, swirling like oil, covering the scarred plasteel and chipped ouslite with obsidian tiles that blink out of nowhere, and diorite blocks that instantiate like fog. Black columns re-manifest, sweeping arches climb and connect high above. Distance and dimension twist along disturbing planes. The angles and planes of the battered flagship chamber are pushed away in all directions, and fade to nothing. The infinite midnight architecture of the Court is restored, and the gathered Neverborn cringe and cower back into the gloom.

The Court seems even bigger than before. The galleries and processionals adjoining the nave of the main Court seem to extend to giddying vanishing points. Through dreary archways and sinister vaults, Leetu glimpses side chambers and chapel

shrines and sub-temple precincts that multiply and multiply, and all lead away into the infinite.

The coloured glassaic of the high windows, ten kilometres tall, throbs with the baleful light of a storm raging outside, and casts a mosaic of flickering colour across the gleaming, jet-black floor.

The wrath of the neverness storm is nothing to the rage rising in Leetu's heart. He has failed. The promise he made to his mistress is broken. The Emperor is vanquished, and Ruin is triumphant.

Leetu should have done more.

He should have done something. He should have persisted, and thrown himself into that awful combat, even if that had meant being torn apart by the opposing powers. That death would have been better than this regret.

All he did was protect a corpse. The Angel's dead. Who fights for the dead? The only thing worth fighting for is the living.

Leetu sees the fingers of the Emperor's limp right hand twitch slightly. Just a tremble. He is alive still, just. Balanced on the edge of life, and helpless in the face of the final execution Horus Lupercal is about to deliver.

But father and son have finally stopped moving at those insane superhuman speeds, speeds incompatible with Leetu's metabolism. Leetu couldn't hope to strike then, or lend his blade to any advantage. But now he can. Now he can keep his promise to Erda.

Leetu steals towards them. He hugs the shadows, as timid and insignificant as the Neverborn vermin that he drove from the corpse. He ignores the black, fractal scales rippling under his feet as they re-form. He ignores the spatters of royal blood, the debris of auramite fragments, and the foetid stink of burnt ylem. He ignores a stray card of the Imperial Tarot that falls from nerveless fingers, *The Space Marine*. His focus is utterly

fixed on the Lupercal and his prey. He steals towards them, leaving one corpse behind in the hope of making another.

The Emperor must die.

Well, perhaps. It's your choice. You are your own master. You get to decide. And you don't have to do what the Neverborn tell you. That was the deal. You are no servant of Chaos.

Your father, weak, half-conscious, leans against you. You take His weight. He rests a hand against your chest for support.

There's still time for your dreadful mercy, if you choose to exercise it. He has no more fight left in Him. In this moment of submission, you get to decide the penalty. You can grant Him the justice He never showed to you. The Revelation. You can share your gnosis with Him, so that He can learn how He should have treated His own flesh and blood.

You turn Him towards the waiting thrones. Let there be a last rite. A coronation. Better to end this way. Mercy is greater than execution. Compliance is better than illumination. Truth trumps silence. And an anguished eternity of understanding and penance on a hand-built throne far exceeds the brief punishment of death.

Your Court is assembled. It is now in session. You drag your dying father towards the seats of power, and towards judgement. He leaves a trail of His life behind Him on the floor, smeared splashes of centuries. And the powerless cards of His final, useless hand lie discarded where they fell, uppermost *The Knight of Mandatio*. The blood splashed on it almost obscures its ancient, ritual image of an armoured warrior, in profile, sword held upright at his shoulder, a new moon in the sky above him.

Loken follows the warring shadows, guided by the light of his blade. He moves through the numberless, angled dimensions of the Court, crossing from one facet of the fight to another, slowly closing on his quarry.

The weak flames of his blade show him that the fight has almost run its course. On the snow-clad flank of some towering mountain peak, Loken sees Horus rip the Emperor's heart from His chest, and let the golden corpse slide away down the unforgiving ice. On the battlements of a mighty, endless wall, bathed in sunlight, he watches Horus break the Emperor's skull with his maul. In the frozen depths of a winter forest, he glimpses a great Lunar wolf tear out the throat of a Fenrisian rival. On the banks of a great river, he sees a warrior-king strike down the chieftain-priest of a resisting territory, and leave himself with no new worlds to conquer. On some mausoleum planet, deep in the dry depths of a sealed tomb, he beholds Pale Death gradually disfigure the cadaver of a gilded monarch. In the chancel of an abolished cathedral, he is driven back by the heat as the Warmaster burns his Master to ash with his bloodlit gaze. So many contests, one single outcome. Horus hacks the Emperor to ribbons at the foot of the Eternity Gate. In the quietest corner of a stately park at dawn, a duellist stripped to his breeches and muslin shirt lowers his smoking pistol. An unquenchable black hole devours the white dwarf star that cannot escape its pull. Amid the barbed-wire tangle of a muddy no-man's-land, a weary officer despatches his prisoner with a crack of his service revolver. In a smoky feasting hall, a ring-mailed usurper takes his axe to the bared neck of a conquered high king. On the plasteel continent of a noospheric realm, a daemon engine annihilates its Omnissiah. Wild lightning tears down a tower so carefully planned to stand forever. Above windy steppes, a hawk strikes an eagle from the boundless sky. In a gloomy, sacred cave, an angry son kills his father with a rock.

Loken sees so many aspects, struck down and dying. So many ends. So many deaths. Each aspect is falling. Each multiplied facet of the duel is concluding, and as each one concludes, the facet containing it fades into smoke.

The flames along Rubio's blade are growing dimmer.

They lead Loken into the Court, though he knows he has been there all along. He hasn't so much found the Court, as it

has found him. As the facets of the fight finish and dissolve, no longer needed, all that remains is the Lupercal Court.

Loken is entering through some temple precinct, a vast side chapel adjoining the main hall. It's twilight here, still and silent. The precinct is a long, ritual garden, flanked by rows of jet columns. In the dim light, Loken sees the stone walkways that edge the rectangular sacred pools. The water in the pools is as still and flat as glass. He can smell, rather than see, the water flowers and ghost ferns that grow in these pools, and the banks of night-blooming acanthus that fringe the garden's geometric plan. He hears the gurgle of a hidden spring.

It is a grove of mysteries, a place of scrying. The wide pools are astrological mirrors, and the walkways are lined with stone bowls, dishes and basins of every shape and size, all filled with dark water to reflect the starlight. The temple garden has no roof, and is open to a sky that is nothing but blackness, but faint stars twinkle from the uncountable mirrors of water.

Loken moves forward along the central causeway. The air smells damp and secret. The place overwhelmingly reminds him of somewhere, and he knows that's deliberate. The water garden in the High City of Sixty-Three Nineteen, the night he was inducted into the confraternity of the Mournival. It was so long ago, just yesterday. It had seemed like a new phase, a new time… a *glorious* new time. Like him, mankind seemed to be on a threshold, about to step forward into greatness.

Not backwards, into flames.

Loken steps forward. This is yet another aspect, another facet, but it's meant especially for him. This is his father's work. His father clearly resents Loken's presence in his Court. The intrusion makes him uncomfortable. He doesn't want his son to bear witness to the acts that he arranged for this Day of Days. Perhaps he is ashamed, in which case, as shame is a human feeling, there is still hope for him.

It would be easier just to kill me, Loken thinks. Perhaps his father can't really bring himself to do that either? Perhaps

that's sentiment, affection… In which case, there is *still* hope, or something that resembles it.

This temple garden is designed to delay Loken. To occupy him. What has his father left waiting for him here? He thinks he knows. He looks down into the glossy, light-catching water of the pool to his left. He sees the reflection of a new moon, a pale curl as insubstantial as a fingernail paring. A new phase indeed.

Yes, he knows what's waiting. He knows what faces will have been chosen. It will be the three that admitted him, the other phases of the Mournival. Ezekyle, Tarik and Little Horus, or conjured warp-echoes of them, at least. Will they fight him? Will they try to make him pledge a new oath to be admitted to his father's inner circle once more? Will they remonstrate with him for the oaths he took, and broke?

Or for the ones he kept?

He hears a sound, and freezes. For all the world, it sounded like the clap of a hoof against stone. He thinks of cloven-footed daemons, and brings his blade up ready at his shoulder.

'Give us your name,' a voice calls out of the darkness. It speaks the words in Cthonic, Loken's home-tongue, the battle-argot of the Luna Wolves.

'Garviel Loken is my name to give,' he replies in kind. 'But not yours to have.'

'And what is your honour?'

'I am captain of the Tenth Company of the Sixteenth Legion Astartes, the Luna Wolves.'

'There are no Luna Wolves any more,' the voice replies. 'Only Sons of Horus.'

'While I stand and breathe,' Loken answers calmly, 'the Luna Wolves exist.'

Silence, lingering. Then:

'And who is your sworn master?'

Loken smiles to himself. A daemon-trick question. In the High City, the correct answer was ‘the Warmaster and the Emperor both’, and he gave it sincerely. Loken has survived the trickery of daemons. He replies with guile of his own.

‘I can’t say,’ he answers.

There is a metallic scrape as the slot of a lantern is pulled open, and yellow flame-light shines out across him. There are figures ahead of him. Three of them. He hears the clack of hooves again.

And he realises why he is here, and why the aspect has been prepared for him. It’s not to delay him, or keep him occupied, or to hide him from his father’s sight. He has been brought to this Court to be judged for the betrayal of his Mournival oaths.

His father isn’t sparing him. He is singling him out for special punishment. Horus has no sentiment or affection left. Hope is gone. This moonlit garden is not a kind attempt to hold him back, and prevent him from witnessing an execution.

It *is* a place of execution.

The three figures step forward, one on either side of the pools, the other on the central causeway facing him. They are not Ezekyle, Tarik and Little Horus after all. Loken hears the clip of their hooves on the flagstones.

They are black centaurs, tall and powerful, corded with muscle. They hold their weapons in their human hands proudly, and wear helms of black plate with tall, topknot crests of bound horsehair. Like the Mournival until Loken joined it, they all have the same face. The face of Horus.

From the other end of the causeway, their leader glares at Loken.

‘Illuminate him,’ says the Dreadful Sagittary.

‘Sit with me,’ you say. ‘You kept no place for me, in your heart or your mind, but I have kept a place for you. A throne, and a crown of secrets. I do for you what you should have done for me.’

Your father makes no reply. You lead Him, half-limping, half-dragging across the chamber to the noble thrones, leaving a wet track of clotting centuries in your wake. He leans into you, frail, His hand against your chest. Is this, at last, the paternal gesture you have craved from Him? Just a touch? No words. He'd never say it. He can't speak anyway.

But whispers rise around you. Querulous. Dismayed. Infuriated. What are you doing? This isn't what was supposed to happen. This isn't what was ordained.

This wasn't the point.

'Hush,' you say.

They do not.

'Stop your whispers,' you tell them, hauling your father to His final seat.

They look at you, the Neverborn and the damned, and you read alarm in their faces. No, *more* than alarm. Horror.

'You are always whispering,' you say. 'Whisper, whisper. It's annoying. Stop it.'

The whispers rise in intensity. They are angry, as though you've backed out on something. As though you – *you* – have reneged on a deal. There was no deal beyond your supremacy. The whispers seethe, accusing treachery. Heresy.

'Don't talk to me about heresy,' you tell them.

Caecaltus runs, though he cannot run. He stumbles, but he does not advance. The grim amphitheatre where his King-of-Ages fights the monster seems forever out of reach, telescoping further away the harder he struggles towards it. He sees his King-of-Ages fall. He sees the worldbreaking blow that drops the Master of Mankind to the dust of the hellish arena.

He can't run. His body is too wrecked by the Lupercal's fury, his bones too broken. He staggers to a halt.

Ahead, right there yet too far away, the vast, black amphitheatre is silent. It is not a hush of anticipation. The silence is solid, an anechoic flatness. The audience is still present, still jeering and hissing. He can see their lost-and-damned faces, spectral in the gloom, wide-eyed and whispering, infuriated by the spectacle they had gathered to witness. But they make no sound.

He can hear his pulse thumping in his ears. The drumming heartbeat. He can hear his own pain. He can hear a voice, a voice from nowhere, a voice echoing from blackness.

The Emperor must live.

He hears his own death approaching, a fast and rumbling chariot. There is only one place he is prepared to die. At His side. They will rise together or fall together. The only death a Hetaeron should contemplate.

He hears a scream. It is his own. His mouth is wide, and spittle is flying as he empties his lungs in a howl of defiance, the first war cry he has uttered since he was made.

He hears the thunder of his own footsteps on the deck. He hears his pain crack as he tramples it underfoot and runs through it, ignoring agony, forgetting injury, driven by His will alone.

Some work of noble note may yet be done.

The Emperor must live.

You lift your father into the throne you have made ready for Him. The Neverborn whispers around you have turned to protests and vehement indignation. What do *they* know? Let them live with their disappointment. They came here to see blood and witness a death. Let them choke on blood. You are the master here. You make the decisions. You will give them something better. Not a quick, crowd-pleasing death, like the arrogant Angel got. A lasting punishment. An *ever*lasting punishment. You will share all your secrets with your father, all the secrets that the warp has shown you. You will teach

Him the error of His ways, and enumerate His sins for Him, by doing for Him what He dismally failed to do for you.

It was never your father's power, it was what He did with it. He kept it all for Himself. So you will illuminate Him.

For the secrets that are yours to share are far brighter and more fierce than any fire He stole from Molech. Their truth will burn Him for the remainder of time on this throne of suffering and flame.

Let the crowd jeer. Let them protest. Let the Old Four leer in disapproval. Gods do not make mistakes.

Your father, at least, seems to accept your judgement. As you move His fractured, final aspect onto the throne, His hand stays pressed against your chest, a tender touch that seems to say that He understands, and that He is grateful for your mercy in commuting His sentence. He will be with you forever, always at your side, father and son. With that simple touch, He expresses His appreciation of you, and for the gift that only you can give Him because you are, still, no matter what, His first-found child.

The bond of blood. The bond of family. Something the Neverborn can never understand. He finally acknowledges you.

You realise that His hand upon your chestplate has grown warm. You can feel the heat through the Serpent's Scales.

You look down. His face is drenched in blood. His eyes turn up to look into yours.

They light up with white fire.

The blast lifts you up, throws you across the infinite angles of the galaxy, and tears your soul in two.

It's not your father's power. It's how He *steals* it.

10:v

Last rites

Hush.

No sound.

The Neverborn open-mouthed, outrage turned to utter dismay.

You rise again, burnt ether broiling off you, pain wrenching you. The vile old man proves treacherous to the very last. He abused your mercy to get His breath back. He used that tender, casual touch to draw power from you to replenish Himself. Your father has deceived you, and used you, as He has *always* deceived you and used you.

He's rising too. He's on His feet, leaning one hand against the arm of the throne you chose for Him, straightening up. The gleaming lustre has returned to His war plate, the white asterism behind His head relit. He shimmers with stolen power.

He has restored His aspect and refreshed it. It is almost a *new* aspect, still the regal warrior-king in gold, but the planes and angles of His armour are now sharper and more aggressive. Majesty has been subordinated to ravening threat. He is more warlike than you have ever seen Him.

Except His war-sword is on the other side of the Court where it fell from His hand.

He comes at you. You go to meet Him.

This will take but a moment.

He's leeched power from you to replenish Himself, and done it so cunningly you didn't even feel it. There is a reason for that. It was so small an amount, you barely felt it sapped away.

Your power is, and always has been, drawn without restraint or limit.

You snatch up *Worldbreaker* and lunge at Him. He stands His ground, His right hand making certain dextrous movements, His left, the lightning claw, likewise gesturing, both describing sigils that form and crackle in the air.

Sigillite magic. A charlatan's last gambit. You–

Your plastron feels warm where His hand rested on you. You look down, and see another sigil marked there, glowing, inscribed surreptitiously as He leaned against you. It pulses, a timed delay–

The blast hurls you sideways. It detonates with the force of a Reaver squad's breaching mine. You are thrown down, your collarbone and right shoulder shattered. He's rushing you before you can rise, hurling the air-cast sigils at you. They are both pentacles, drawn from His arcanology, and they whirl, spitting sparks, as they descend like circular saws. You smack one away with your maul. The screaming razor points of the other slice through your plate and ribs before you can swat it aside. He has already drawn two more that squeal as they rotate towards you. You deflect the third with *Worldbreaker*, cracking it. Your shattered shoulder has rendered your Talon useless. You are obliged to destroy the fourth with a beam of bloodlight from the eye upon your breast.

And while you are thus occupied, He falls upon you.

He grabs *Worldbreaker*'s haft with hand and claw, and drives it down flat to crush across your throat. White fire spears from His eyes to blind the Eye of Horus on your chest. You cannot fend Him off with your dead Talon. Face to face, your refractor shields and telaethesics spit and crackle and squeal on contact.

You're pinned. But He is nothing like as strong as you, and has nothing like your mass. You twist, then roll, and throw Him off. The three remaining pentacle sigils are still spinning,

but they bounce aside. One hits the deck and sticks fast on one point like a throwing star.

He has your maul.

He tore it from your grip. You rise to meet Him. You circle. He loops *Worldbreaker* with expert ease, the great maul whooping through the air. He swings it. You duck, and it fails to connect. He swings again, strikes you on the upswing, and knocks you onto your back. He loops an over-swing without hesitation, bringing *Worldbreaker* down at you as you are prone. No mercy for a fallen foe. He wants to put you down and keep you down.

You roll aside with a curse. *Worldbreaker* demolishes black floor tiles. You scramble up. *Worldbreaker* strikes you in the back while you are still half-kneeling, and knocks you on your face.

The whistling maul comes down. You roll again, with all urgency, but it hits your belly-plate refractors and caves them in. The next swing comes at your face.

But by then, your ruined shoulder has reknitted.

The Talon flashes up and catches the descending head of the maul with the boom of a firing bombard.

Up you get. You lurch Him backwards. He is gripping *Worldbreaker*'s ferrule with both hands. You clench the maul's head in your Talon. You use the maul like a rod to force Him backwards. He tries to twist the haft to break your grip. You clench it tighter, push and twist, shoving Him two paces back, then another two. Another lunge lifts His feet off the ground for a second.

You rip *Worldbreaker* from His hands as He stumbles back, unbalanced. You deftly toss the maul from your Talon to your left hand, and catch it smartly. You spin it once.

Where *were* we, father?

The Neverborn host whoop and shrill your name.

What does He have left? He should have stolen more power from you when He had the chance. Why did He take so little? Ah, of course. Because He did not *dare* take more. He knows His own propensities. If He had stolen more, He wouldn't have been able to stop. Like a chronic inebriate with no impulse control, He would have drunk Himself mad from the empyrean. He dares not, above all things, risk the malison of the Dark King.

So He took from you sparingly, and He has already used most of what meagre quantity He stole. He is growing feeble. What does He have left? What will He try next?

Lightning, from His spanning claws, of course. The bolt forks at you. You deflect with a necromatic ward, but as He fires it, He looks away and reaches out with His right hand. His fallen war-sword, abandoned on the floor, flies towards Him, hooked by telekine force.

To even things up? You won't have that. *Worldbreaker* intercepts the flying blade before it reaches His hand, and sends it spinning away towards the thrones.

What's left? You swing for His skull. He slides sideways through the Abstraction of Plight to evade the blow, but it's a weak effort. That stolen power is running out. He circles you via the twilit cliffs of the Forsaken Angle, appears at your side, and drives His claws through the refractors shielding your hip. They tear in shreds of light, but He has recklessly put Himself too close, and you snap out *Worldbreaker*'s ferrule and butt Him in the face.

He reels aside, cheekbone broken, onto the Forsaken Angle again, but He doesn't have the strength to stay there. Your Talon seizes Him by the left arm as He spills back into the Court. He tries to tear free, but the Talon bites, cracking auramite and drawing blood. You have Him cold.

He has no strength left for warped angles, or evasion by dimensional plane, and not enough power to conjure fresh aspects either. He has no force to channel, and not even a *hint*

of enough warp-will to move the everywhere of your realm and affect a parry by location. He can't break your grip.

He has no cards left to play. The last of them are scattered on the deck.

As though to demonstrate His weakness, He lights fire from His eyes at you again, lancing down with a white-hot cutting beam in an attempt to slice your Talon from His arm. The power of it is pathetic. Paltry. You clench the Talon tighter, twist, and strip golden plate and flesh from His forearm, unsleeving it to the bone.

Then you let go.

He staggers back, His arm a bloody parody of a limb. His claws rise, and He tries to write another sigil in the air.

Sigil magic. That last of last resorts. It's such a woeful effort, He might as well have surrendered.

You lift *Worldbreaker–*

No, too easy. Too basic. Too *industrial* for a finishing move. That kind of crude force is Perturabo's dull signature. You want a flourish.

You punch with your power claw instead. But with just the index talon extended.

The talon goes through His throat. Right through. His eyes bulge. Blood spills from His mouth.

You slowly draw the blade out, and catch your father as He falls.

He fought well. A stalwart recovery, and a worthy enough rematch, but the end was never in any doubt.

You carry Him back to the throne, His blood running freely, coating everything. You dump Him into the seat without care or ceremony. He lolls forward, drooling blood. You brace His chest and push Him back. He droops to the side, and looks so limp and boneless that He might slide from the throne entirely.

You prop Him back in place, bracing him with *Worldbreaker*'s haft, and turn. A nod of your head brings His sigil pentacles flying to you, the last one wrenching out of the floor. They are spent, and no longer spinning like circular cutters. But the points are still sharp. You catch each one, turn them on edge, and stake Him to the throne. One drives down through His right thigh, the second through His left. The third you ram through His left shoulder, nailing Him on its points to the back of the throne.

Now only His head flops.

You step back, Talon and maul raised, accepting the adulation of the watching host.

He sits, a whisper from death, pinned to a throne that streams with His lifeblood.

There's symbolism there. A throne of blood. Something apt. You'll finesse it later, when you commit your testimony of this day to Remembrancer Oliton.

'Behold,' you cry, 'the False Emperor!'

The daemons squeal and howl. The Old Four approve.

'So will I deal with all tyrants and deceivers!' you roar. The acclaim is so loud, you can barely hear your own voice.

You circle the Court, arms raised, a moment more, then turn to face the throne and finish the coronation.

Your way is blocked.

A figure stands between you and your gore-soaked, staked-up father. It is a small figure, breathing hard and pitifully damaged. But it is braced defiantly to impede your advance.

It fixes you with a quite preposterously bold glare of resistance.

'By. His. Will. Alone,' gasps Caecaltus Dusk.

10:vi

Dusk

Horus Lupercal speaks his name.

‘Dusk. Proconsul Caecaltus Dusk.’

He seems amused.

‘Again, you interrupt and speak out of turn. My father and I have matters to conclude, and a legacy to discuss, and you, little soldier, have no place in that.’

‘I defy you,’ says Caecaltus in a cold, clear voice. ‘The Imperium defies you.’

‘With… *what*?’ the Lupercal asks.

Caecaltus stands his ground. He aims the glinting paragon spear at the monster facing him. He keeps his back to his king, stricken on the profane throne behind him. He places himself between wounded father and murderous son.

But he knows the monster’s right. He’s shivering, almost shaking with pain. He’s weak. His refractors have failed. Even at his peak, he would not have been sufficient for this fight.

He has nothing. Nothing at all.

Leetu reaches the row of primitive thrones, and cowers in their shadows. They are ugly things, crudely and inexpertly hewn from stone. The angles of their structures – the backs, the seats, the arms – seem wrong and unnatural.

Like the room itself. So dark and quiet and forlorn. Whispers seem to crease the air, but the vault of death is empty, and they are so alone. Just him, the Master of Mankind, and the beast of all beasts.

And the Hetaeron proconsul.

The Custodian, Dusk, has appeared from somewhere, alive after all. But he has doomed himself. The idiot has stepped into the open, and is trying to confront Horus. He's standing in the Lupercal's path, trying to stare him down.

That's just madness. But what else can the man do? Leetu thinks. *What else did I think I was going to do? Face this impossible monster? Throw myself in front of the Emperor to protect Him? Die instantly?*

It's all futile. They've got nothing. Leetu, the insanely brave proconsul, the Luna Wolf Loken, if he's still alive… They're just men. They're just specks. Outclassed, outgunned, helpless in the face of this. It's a miracle that any of them have survived this long. This is a warp-war. This is a clash of higher powers, of cosmic properties far above and beyond any mortal limits. This is a once-in-a-civilisation event. And the three of them who came here with the Master of Mankind are inconsequential, insignificant. They're mere microbes, just dust carried on the heel of events. They're lucky to even be present as bystanders. They're not meant to be here. There's no place in this for them, no role to play. Leetu wonders how they're even alive. The inhuman nature of this place, the warping concentration of immaterial force, should make it impossible for them to exist in this environment. They should no more be standing here, than on the surface of a neutron star or at the heart of a supernova, or any other hyper-hostile location in the galaxy where human life simply cannot exist. They all should have perished the instant they arrived.

For there is nowhere more hyper-hostile to mortal life than this Court.

For them to be here, even as onlookers, there must be some force or property in the Court that sustains human organics and prevents them from being annihilated by the immaterial concentration.

Perhaps, thinks Leetu, that's Horus. Whatever human relic of the first-found still exists in the core of that dark horror, it must be essential. It must need to exist for Horus to maintain

his form as the personified instrument of Chaos. They are still alive, Leetu and the proconsul, merely as a consequence of Horus' need to maintain his human essence.

Is that a weakness? A flaw they can exploit?

A weakness perhaps, but beyond the means of Leetu or Caecaltus to leverage. Such exploitation would take a better man. A greater being, someone who functions at the Lupercal's level of cosmic proficiency.

Leetu is just a Space Marine. This is not a fight he was built to undertake, and he has no chance in this arena. But he has the fierce tactical insight of any Astartes.

Caecaltus Dusk has, for a second or two, distracted the attention of the Lupercal. He has used the only weapon he has left – courage. Leetu can stand with him, and die with him, or he can use that distraction and attempt to free the only being who might have a chance to stop the first-found.

Leetu slips along the towering line of thrones, darting from shadow to shadow, and reaches the Emperor. The Master of Mankind looks dead, His great form desecrated and limp, glazed with gore, His eyes closed. He has been staked to the stone seat with strange five-pointed stars that look as though they are made of molten iron. Leetu tries to pull one of them free. It is stuck fast through the Emperor's right thigh, and it burns Leetu's hands to touch it, despite his armoured gauntlets. Leetu takes *Mourn-It-All*, and attempts to use the blade as a lever instead. The Emperor does not stir.

With a snarl of supreme effort, Leetu yanks the first pentacle free. It clatters aside to the deck like a ring of heated steel, and cold, thick blood oozes sickly from the wound it has left. Frantically, Leetu starts to prise at the star impaling the left thigh. There's no time left.

Caecaltus' defiance of the Warmaster will be over in another second.

'You have been tricked, Horus Lupercal,' says Caecaltus Dusk. His spear trembles in his hands.

‘Get out of my way,’ the Warmaster rumbles.

‘I refuse,’ replies the Hetaeron. ‘By His will–’

‘He has no will left! It’s a wonder you’re even standing! Get out of my way.’

‘No,’ says Caecaltus. Horus doesn’t need his permission. Horus can step on and through him effortlessly. But the crowd around them is enjoying this moment of cruel sport. Caecaltus can hear them baying and whooping. This agonising torture of a doomed mortal soul, drawn out. The chance to hear it make its futile pleas, the chance to hear it appeal, with that ridiculously human quality called hope, to a pity that does not exist. The chance to drink in its sincerity and cherish its bravery, and then savour the sweet burst of pain at the end when it realises such properties have no currency. Caecaltus can see the Warmaster trying to hide his smile, and maintain a solemn timbre in his voice. He is playing to the crowd, a sly wink.

‘You have been tricked, my son,’ says Caecaltus Dusk.

The Warmaster’s gaze abruptly switches back to him. It is suddenly intense.

‘What did you say?’

‘I said, you have been tricked,’ repeats Caecaltus. His arms are quivering. He does not know how much longer he can hold the spear up or remain on his feet. ‘Chaos puppets you. The Old Four don’t need you to be the new Emperor. They do not even comprehend such mortal concerns. They merely need you to kill the old one, to stop the ascension of mankind. You–’

The Talon rises and points at him.

‘You said, “my son”. The voice you speak with is not yours.’

‘It is the only voice I have ever known,’ says Caecaltus Dusk. ‘It is the only voice I speak with and the only voice I hear. I am my own voice, Horus first-found. Listen to it, my distant son. You have been tricked–’

‘The only voice I hear is the voice of the deceiver,’ replies Horus, and erases Caecaltus Dusk where he stands.

The beam of bloodlight burns from the great eye on the Warmaster’s breastplate for five or six seconds, engulfing the proconsul entirely. Then the glare of it fades.

Leetu hears the shriek of vile light incinerate the Hetaeron behind him. He feels the backwash of heat. He has wrenched the second pentacle out, and cast it aside, freeing the other thigh. He climbs onto the edge of the throne’s seat to reach the third star that’s driven through the Emperor’s shoulder.

The great figure is bent forward, His head bowed. Blood strings from His split lips and His nose, and matts the long black hair that hangs like a curtain around His face. His left arm is shockingly stripped to the bone from the shoulder, the sleeve of flesh and crumpled armour bunched around His wrist. All life seems extinct, as absent as it was in the lifeless corpse of His angel son. The third pentacle is the only thing holding Him upright in the blasphemous throne. Leetu, his hands cut and bloody from his efforts, starts to draw the third star out. It will not move.

‘Wake up!’ Leetu hisses as he pulls and strains. ‘Wake up, Emperor! Wake up, great lord! You must wake up now! Wake and rise before it is too late! Your daemon-son is almost upon you!’

He tries to use *Mourn-It-All* as a lever again, hooking it through the hot-iron form of the pentacle. He exerts so much force that a shard of the sword-blade breaks from a small crack near the hilt.

‘Wake!’ Leetu yells. ‘Wake! Erda sent me to you! She would want you to stand! She needs you to stand!’

Mourn-It-All’s blade begins to bend under the stress.

The proconsul’s paragon spear, smoking and superheated, clatters to the floor of the Court.

Caecaltus Dusk is still standing. His plate is glowing almost red hot from the energy it has been exposed to, and Caecaltus’

flesh is blistered and raw, the upper layers of skin cooked off. But he is still standing, and he is alive.

The Lupercal's eyes narrow into a deep frown. The crowd is silent.

'Not possible,' he murmurs.

'B-by H-His w-will a-alone…' Caecaltus slurs through cracked and swollen lips.

For a moment, the Warmaster seems to blanch slightly, as though he has come face to face, at long last, with something he does not understand. Then he sees the mark on the breastplate of the swaying Custodian, a crude sigil that looks as though it has been daubed with a finger, and has only become visible now the armour has been superheated. The sigil glows.

'Sigillite magic,' Horus snaps contemptuously. He starts to recite the proconsul's name, which he stole from the very air when they were first face to face. He starts to recite all of it, all of the six hundred and ten parts of it that are micro-etched inside Caecaltus' armour.

'Caecaltus Dusk Onatvite Albia Salmay Levantine Sarcosal Cuzco Barbieri Guillory Cazabon…'

Twenty names in, Caecaltus starts to sway wildly, as though he is about to fall. But he keeps his feet.

The eye on the Warmaster's chest blasts again, a more concentrated, sustained beam of bloodlight that he allows to stream a great deal longer than the first. No ancient sigil-craft can withstand it this time. Caught in the blinding beam of energy, Caecaltus Dusk shudders, buckles, and then blows apart in a spray of golden fragments. The scraps of auramite, molten-hot and smouldering, scatter across the deck. The largest intact piece, the heavy Aquilon breastplate, crashes to the ground.

Nothing organic survives.

‘Wake up!’ Leetu barks. He hears the awful shriek of another burst of energy behind him. Flakes of hot ash billow back across him, the throne, and the Emperor. The third pentacle is beginning to edge free, but it will not come out. The Emperor’s blood is all over his hands, his arms and his chest.

‘Erda sent me!’ he shouts. ‘Erda bids you stand and–’

He’s in mid-air suddenly, legs swinging, his torso compressed by a terrible pressure. The first-found monster has reached him. It has seized him in its damn Talon and plucked him off the throne. The bladed claws are closed around his body.

Horus holds him up, examining him like some puzzling specimen.

‘What are you?’ the Warmaster rumbles up at him.

Struggling helplessly against the vice of the Talon, Leetu gazes down into the bloodlit face below him. Now he knows fear.

‘No name to find,’ Horus muses. ‘No blood to match. Just a number. LE two. But you spoke a name. *Erda*. Did she send you here? Did she think she could intervene in this?’

‘She will–’ Leetu gasps.

‘She will nothing,’ Horus responds. ‘She is dead. The Apostle Erebus told me how he had killed her out in that desert place. Her blood is cold, Space Marine, and you have failed in every duty you were asked to perform.’

Leetu’s murmur of anguish draws laughter from the crowd. Horus shakes his head, and then tosses Leetu away with a flick of his Talon. He doesn’t bother to look where the legionary falls.

Leetu lands on his back hundreds of metres away. He is dazed with concussion, and all sound is flat and muffled. Everything is dulled and numb except his grief.

He opens his eyes. He can see nothing, except an enclosing darkness. He can’t move. He begins to make out shapes

around him. A high, white arch overhead, made of smooth alabaster. A sheer wall to his right, faced in gleaming metal.

There is a smell. It's a smell like nothing he's ever known. It is rich and cloying, and unlike any smell in material creation. The unique stink of the deep void, seared meat, hot metal and melta fumes. The fragrance of madness. The odour of perdition. The smell is suffocating.

His focus resolves. The shapes around him un-blur. The wall of metal is not a wall of metal. It is the side of an axe-blade rested on its edge. The blade is as tall as a mountain precipice. The arch is not an alabaster arch. It is the curve of a moon-white claw, like that of a raptor, curled up from a scaled toe and over onto its tip. He is lying beneath it, because the curve of that claw is a kilometre high.

It belongs to something. There are things around him, things so impossibly vast he can only see parts of them, the parts nearest the ground where they loom over him. He has fallen in among them, like a discarded bone from a feast-table. He is lying in their midst, at their feet.

There are four of them.

One turns its head, a thousand kilometres above him, and peers down at him with glazed indifference.

There's not even any point screaming.

10:vii

Hollow victory

This time, the fury of Typhus does not relent. The Death Guard host does not attack and withdraw. It maintains its pressure. In the hammering rain, the whole pass shakes with the traitors' fury. The teeming warriors assail every part of the cliff defences and the earthworks, as though they mean to tear the whole mountain down.

Sigismund isn't sure they couldn't. The Pale King's sons seem to be able to do anything they wish. He is fighting from the sagging end of a fighting platform that has partly given way, and hangs perilously from the face of the *Gateway Cliff* rampart. Death Guard warriors are rushing up sheer rock at him, making the cliff face their ground, mocking his precarious position over the drop. His black sword sweeps and hacks, wet with gore. The Death Guard only fall when they die. Sigismund isn't sure they're not just picking themselves up again at the foot of the precipice, and climbing back up.

'Fall back!' Pontis yells. He and Artolun are on the broken walkway behind him. Most of the Seconds have come up from below to reinforce the First Legion brothers. Sigismund has lost sight of Corswain. He can't see more than twenty metres in the deluge.

'Fall back!' Pontis yells again. Sigismund can hear the creak and ping of shearing stanchions. The ailing platform is beginning to dip more steeply. He thrusts down with the black sword and sends another of the Death Guard milling away into the drop, then he claws his way back up the rail. Pontis and Artolun grab him by the arms, and the three of them haul themselves onto the stone rampart just seconds before the platform disintegrates entirely.

It falls away, scraping hundreds of Death Guard off the cliff face and away to their deaths.

In seconds, their places have already been filled by more of their kind swarming up the vertical rock.

On the rampart top, Sigismund and Artolun hold the first of them off as Pontis yells for support. Dark Angels rush to them, and lay into the melee that is now spilling onto the stone piling. Sigismund notices that one of the First has an arm missing, the stump bandaged. In this last moment of the world, even the gravely wounded are joining the fight.

Sigismund focuses, concentrating only on the foes that come at him. He shears at them with his sword, feeling the jolt of impact transmit down his arm with every blow, filling the air with showers of dark blood. The flies are all over them, crawling into his mouth and eyes. A Dark Angel falls from the rampart edge taking two Death Guard brutes with him.

Around the head of the pass, the ferocity of Sigismund's fight is matched on every bulwark, edge or fighting platform. A vapour, part smoke from weapons fire, part steam from hot metal and fresh blood, is lifting off the neck of the ravine in the freezing air.

The future is neither now nor here. That was Sigismund's mantra. One step at a time, to do what can be done now, so that what must be done will follow as an ultimate consequence. In the ringing thicket of death and metal, Sigismund fears that the future *is* here at last. The future none of them wanted. The future they have fought for seven years to resist.

The future that will devour them all.

He hears a voice.

At first he thinks it's the seneschal, or Adophel, calling them to arms, yelling desperate orders from the crags above. But it is something else, and besides, the tone is too light and soft for either of the Dark Angels lords.

It is clear, though. It is terribly clear. It rings from the darkness below, and the winter sky above. It rings from the crags and the ice-sheathed scarps. It shivers from the very rock itself.

‘Sons and daughters of the Imperium of Man,’ it says. ‘Rise now. Rise up. By the command of the Praetorian, take up your weapons and advance. The Emperor stands alone, at the hour of greatest peril. Take up your weapons and come to His aid. Protect Him as He protects you. You are the shield of humanity! Rise together and stand as one. Stand at His side now, or all is lost. Terra must endure. The Imperium must stand. Horus Lupercal must fall. The Emperor must live.’

A command. From his father, his own beloved Praetorian. Sigismund is filled with a strength of fury, or a fury of strength. He brings his blade to his forehead in quick salute, and finds a reserve that he did not know he still possessed.

Unyielding, he lays into the foe around him.

‘The Emperor must live!’ he yells. ‘The Emperor must live!’

Lord Cypher looks at Keeler.

‘You heard that?’ he asks.

‘I hear it still,’ she answers, her eyes wide in wonder.

They both do. The echoes are still ringing around the boreholes and chambers of the Hollow Mountain.

You are the shield of humanity! Rise together and stand as one. Stand at His side now, or all is lost… The Emperor must live…

Everyone has heard it. An awkward mix of terror and awe spreads through the huddled multitude, rippling like wildfire through dry brush, spreading from chamber to chamber as the geophonics amplify, carrying the echoes deeper and deeper.

‘Active resonance!’ Cartheus calls out, pointing to the flash and sizzle of coloured light inside the chamber wall, pulses that dart and scribble across the rock like capillaries under the skin.

The lights ebb, and start to fade again.

‘Keeler,’ Cypher says. His tone is urgent. ‘Bring their focus to you, as you did before.’

‘And say what?’

‘Whatever you like! One of your dismal verses or pamphlet sermons! Or just repeat those words that just rang out! I need you to lead them again. But more focused than before.’

‘Lead them?’ she asks.

‘Together as one, Keeler!’

She hesitates. It’s not her word to speak, or her voice that calls.

‘It should be you,’ she tells him.

‘I think it has to be you,’ he says.

‘And the Librarius must moderate and–’ Tanderion begins.

Cypher raises a hand to silence him. He is staring intently at Keeler.

She nods.

He gently hands her up onto the basalt plinth again. She looks out across the sea of frightened faces below. She doesn’t know what to say.

Then she does.

‘The Emperor must live,’ she says, not loudly, but plainly. ‘The Emperor is the shield and protector of humanity, but what is His shield? Rejoice, for I bring glorious news. We are. The Emperor is the light in our darkness, but what is His light? Lift up your hands and rejoice. We are. He walks among us, even in the valley of night, and we walk with Him, in defiance of death. It is reciprocal. We are souls bound together. We are together as one, or we are nothing. The Emperor must live. Speak this with me, as it is spoken to me. The Emperor must live.’

10:viii

The empty throne

A stillness settles on your Court at last. No more delays or interruptions. The crowd has fallen silent. There is nothing but the distant rumble of the neverness, and the lazy drone of the psychneuein as they wake and begin to swarm in the gardens of the warp.

The stillness is profound. The galaxy is aligned, all things and all moments, all the infinite angles and countless planes folded into one psychofractal point. Your Court, which surrounds your flagship, which surrounds the neverness, which surrounds the Inevitable City, which surrounds your realm, which surrounds Terra, which surrounds the Solar Realm, which surrounds the galaxy entire, which surrounds the warp, and inside that, they all surround each other, in reverse sequence, like one box inside another, with your Court at the centre, and this moment at its heart.

You glance at the Old Four in the gloom beyond. One brushes drowsy psychneuein from its face with an indolent hand.

They approve. They acknowledge you in a way your father never has.

You nod.

You summon bloodlight in a swirling ball, and cup it in your Talon. You shape it with your mind, stretching it out into a wire of light, like a red thread, then winding it upon itself into an ouroboros loop. You tie knots and twists to form the eight thorny spikes. You make the shaped light glow brightly.

A crown of Chaos. Not as fine as yours will be, but regal enough.

You turn to set it on your father’s head.

The throne is empty. It is smeared with His blood, but it is empty.

Pain shears through your ribs. You stumble, and drop the crown. It bounces across the black floor with the chimes of a funerary bell, and rolls to a clattering halt.

Your father is behind you, on His feet. He has the third pentacle in His hand, gripped like a chakram. Its edge has just gone through you, and its points now drip with your blood as well as His. Somehow He is wielding it with that ruined, flesh-stripped arm. In His claws, He clutches the proconsul's spear, no more than a short-handle falx to Him.

Your father will not give up. A little reprieve, and He has regained enough strength to try yet again.

He rakes the pentacle at you. You sidestep. He is slow, clumsy. Why? Why will He not just give up? Twice now, you have beaten Him. He *must* understand He cannot win.

He hacks with the cold iron spikes a third time. You block them with your Talon, and the pentacle, its Sigillite magic entirely spent, shatters like ice.

He casts the pieces aside. He circles you, swaying and unsteady. He tosses the spear into His left hand. Not quite a war-sword, but it has an edge. His eyes never leave yours.

Those eyes are tired. The light in them has almost gone out. There is so very little fire left.

He lurches at you. A feint. As you turn out, the blade of the spear rakes into your refractors. Sparks gush. You block with your maul, but then His claws are into you on the other side. There is no lightning left in them now, but the tip of one draws blood.

You swing back, Talon bared. He leans out of its path, reverses, and lands three blows with the spear that leave gouges in your vambrace.

This is just melancholy. You wanted this part to be over quickly, and not dwell on the undignified necessities, but He

seems determined to make the unseemly pantomime last as long as humanly possible. He wants to take the sparkle off your glory, so that the start of your reign is remembered as a scrappy, bloody business.

Is this your father's final aspect, then? A revenant despoiler, like the loathed card in the deck, that refuses to be banished, and contaminates the majesty of your triumph? A bitter, vengeful spirit that refuses to let go of His throne as fiercely as it rejects the compensation you offer in its place?

How like Him to do this. He has never let you be you, without His shadow falling over you, blocking the light, staining everything you are and everything you do, qualifying you, compromising you, compelling you. You have all the power, but somehow, *somehow*, He is still there, still clinging on with His bloody, broken fingernails, still deciding how things should be, ruling your life. You suppose that when a life has been as long as His, it is easy to forget how succession should work, how the old is meant to give way to the new, how the healthy cycle of renewal should play out for the good of all. He has stalled that natural cycle for thirty thousand years, and the foetid stagnation of that transgression is plain for all to see.

All except Him. He is blind to it. He is clinging to the past, and the way things have been done, but the past is a corpse. Let it go. Let it go, it's dead. Can't He see the writhing maggot mass that He will not allow to be buried? Can't He see the fresh and vital start, so long overdue, that your will alone can usher in?

In this grisly defiance, He is mocking you, mocking your mercy, your noble victory, your admirable achievement, your legitimacy, your benevolent magnanimity. He is determined to be as awkward and intractable as He can to ruin your Day of Days.

Selfish. Stubborn, Spiteful. Oblivious, as ever, to the needs and desires of others, making everything about Him, long past

the end of His authority or significance. In defeat, He is hell-bent on ruining victory for you.

He lashes out with the claws again, and you easily move out of reach. Missing you, He stumbles drunkenly to keep His balance.

Those eyes. Those tired, lightless eyes. Oh, you see it now. In those eyes you see the truth of it. He knows He's done, but He won't give up. He's refusing to submit. This pathetic, halting effort is not simply a bid to disgrace your crowning moment, it's an attempt to goad you.

He wants you to kill Him.

He's trying to aggravate you, and provoke you into lashing out. He wants you to end Him. He would rather die than accept your offer and your crown.

Death is the only victory He can claim over you now.

He comes at you, another pass, horribly telegraphed by the rasping breath He draws into blood-frothed lungs before He attempts it. He hasn't got the strength or will to disguise His movements or intentions. He flails a wild trio of attacks: spear, claws, spear. You fend Him off, but one blow lands and leaves a wound. It will heal in seconds, but it stings.

He is pushing you as hard as He can to get a reaction. He wants your wrath. He wants your cruelty, not your mercy.

He *really* wants to die.

He makes another clumsy flurry of blows. You deflect the spear, block the claws, turn out from the riposting spear, parry the claws as they swing back in, and then twist the blade of the spear aside.

Then you hit Him with the maul and lay Him out on the floor.

He is sprawled on His side, breathing hard. You can smell blood, ylem, the liquid spatter of leaking years. He has dropped the spear. He tries to rise, and falls back on His elbow. Another few breaths, and He tries again. His legs won't lift Him.

And you won't kill Him.

You are going to make Him accept this fate. You will make Him want the thing He does not want. The crown. The throne. Submission to you and you alone. Death is too easy an escape, too merciful a release, after all He has done to you.

He has been down so long, you could have killed Him six or seven times over with the maul. A single burst of bloodlight from the eye on your chestplate would have annihilated Him, more thoroughly than it did that fawning idiot of a Hetaeron.

But you won't. You circle Him patiently. He's propped up on His arm, and His breathing has become so laboured, He is almost panting. He's almost spent. He tries, once more, to rise. He fails.

'Don't you understand?' you ask. 'I could have killed you the moment you got here. I fought you because I wanted you to live.'

He makes no answer. Yet in the bloody tatters of His thoughts, you perceive the truth as He sees it. You didn't kill Him right away because you didn't *want* to.

Does He really believe that? He is so deluded. You were trying to demonstrate your wisdom of authority. The qualities of grace, restraint and compassion that will characterise your reign, and prove you to be a far finer, fairer monarch than He ever was. Power is nothing. Killing is a soldier's work, or the blunt answer of the inarticulate. Mercy and fairness are the instruments a worthy king wields.

Still, His sputtering, fading thoughts insist the human part of you did not want to kill Him. Just as it does not want to do what the gods command.

'No one commands me, father. Not any more. That is what this damned war's been about.'

He sighs. He thinks that if you believe that, then you have learned nothing.

He bows His head.

You go to Him, crouch down, and make to lift Him back up onto the throne where He belongs.

He looks up at you. His hand comes out from under Him, swinging the crown you made.

The tips of its bloodlight spikes stab into your face and split open your skull.

10:ix

The Knight of Mandatio

The centaurs draw back their black saddle bows and loose.

Their arrows are long darts of lethal bloodlight. Their first volley passes over Loken to drive him forward. Where they strike, against causeway stone, pool edge or sky-mirror bowl, the three burning arrows explode like bolter rounds, casting broken ceramic and flakes of stone into the air, and spilling the reflected stars.

There is no cover. Loken starts to race down the causeway towards the leading sagittary, hoping to close with him before he or his two grim companions can string a second volley. But they have already nocked their next flight of crimson arrows, and are bending their powerful torsos to loose again.

They falter, all three of them, suddenly. Three faces of Horus grimace in pain, as though afflicted by some unseen injury. Still, they loose, but their shots are off-mark. The arrows of the two sagittaries at the sides of the twilit garden strike against obsidian columns in sprays of pink light. The arrow of the lead sagittary, despite his last-moment flinch of pain, flies more truly.

Loken dives headlong off the causeway to avoid it. The pool's ink-dark water enfolds him as the arrow destroys two more scrying pools.

The three sagittaries recover their composure, and spur forward, fresh arrows nocked. The Luna Wolf has vanished. Smoke rises from the shattered urns and bowls their darts have exploded. Ripples spread wide and slow across the left-hand pool, disrupting the zodiacal patterns and the tiny new moon reflected in the water's glossy black mirror.

The leader stops halfway along the causeway, where Loken was last standing. He stares down into the ripples, his bow drawn ready. He jerks his head in a gesture that any man who had served alongside the Lupercal, or First Captain Abaddon, would recognise. The centaur on the right-hand edge of the pools starts to canter at once, rounding the far end of the pool to join his leader on the causeway. The leader, and the centaur facing him across the left-hand pool, draw back their right arms, and loose arrows down into the water.

In starless black, his senses muffled by more than water, Loken sinks. The depth of the pool is a cold, inky darkness. Silver bubbles of air bead the contours of his plate and his slow-moving limbs, and tumble upwards around him, like mirror stars dislodged from the surface. He sees the bright flashes, to his left and directly ahead, as arrows, burning like scarlet neon, slice down into the water at steep angles, hissing like angry snakes. The arrows trail away, until they are lost from view in the blackness below. Their bloodlit fire has not been extinguished. They have simply travelled too far. The pool has no fathomable bottom.

The lead centaur strings another arrow. The archer facing him across the water does likewise. The third is starting up the causeway to join his commander. Nothing has risen to the surface. No arrow-speared corpse has bobbed up. But the leader sees the tiny trace of silver bubbles, air trapped beneath the curve of a pauldron or plastron, escaping to the water's surface.

He strains to loose again, his bowmanship the fluid model of perfection. On the wild and un-timed steppes of the immaterium, he and his kin have hunted forever, and brought down every quarry in the warp. Their bow-skill has become so intuitive, so perfect, it has the grace of high art.

Loken's martial skill does not. He has never cared for the perfection of form, like Lucius or Eidolon, or any other showman. He does not care how he looks when he fights, only what that fight can achieve. His skill has the grace of high function, delivered for maximum effect and the greatest

efficiency: Astartesian principles of practicality and tactical performance to reverse an enemy's advantage, even in the most untenable situation.

The arrows hiss into the pool. As they strike, Loken erupts from the water, right at the edge of the pool beside the causeway. He appears in a spray of water, and Rubio's blade lashes out in a lateral slice even though Loken is but chest-high against the causeway edge.

The sword severs the rear ankles of the lead sagittary. The leader makes a strangled, animal sound as he topples onto his side on the causeway stones, forelegs kicking and churning. Loken has already hoisted himself out of the pool. He rolls over the fallen centaur's body, and uses its spasming, snorting bulk as cover as the third centaur bears down on him along the causeway at a gallop, bow drawn. Rubio's fine blade has no utility against a large, moving target with a ranged weapon. Loken wrenches the bow from the fallen leader's grip, and a bloodlight arrow from the spilled quiver. The arrow stings and burns his fingers as he nocks it.

Blame yourself, Lupercal, Loken thinks as he draws the bow back, kneeling behind the thrashing centaur. Bolter and blade are the fundamental weapons of the Legiones Astartes, but the great Lupercal always insisted his Luna Wolves should know the way of all weapons, and train in their function, through endless practice evolutions in the cages and the sparring decks. His warriors should be ready for any circumstance.

'Imagine,' he once said, 'that you are caught on some simple world during a compliance, your sword lost, your ammunition spent. Could you use even the basic weapons of the Imperium's enemies against them?'

The Luna Wolves could fight with anything. A spear, an axe, a trident, a net, they knew the fundamentals of all, the strengths and weaknesses, just as they could turn a stick into a weapon, a rock, a table, a mirror, a pen.

Loken has not shot a bow for years, but the eidetic Astartesian mind does not forget a technique once it has been

learned.

He looses at the centaur charging at him, just as the charging centaur looses at him. The centaur's arrow strikes the belly of the fallen leader, and the leader's thrashing, whinnying screams increase in intensity. Loken's arrow strikes the approaching centaur in the centre mass of its human torso. Its charge becomes a helpless, tumbling collapse. It slips sideways onto the causeway and crashes over into the right-hand pool in a sheet of spray.

The remaining centaur shoots across the left-hand pool. His skill is superb, but he lifts his aim too high for fear of hitting his stricken leader. The arrow spits past Loken's shoulder. Loken turns, still on his knee, still using the beast's body as a shield, and nocks another corrosive dart. It streaks across the pool, its lurid pink trail reflecting beneath it like a shooting star. It strikes the centaur just as he is drawing again, and shatters his bow in his hands. Hurt, snarling, the sagittary throws the broken bow aside, draws a black scythe off his back and jumps headlong into the pool.

The mirror pools are not fathomless to the centaur-sons of Horus, it would appear. The sagittary thrashes through the black water towards Loken, churning it like a cavalry outrider fording a river. Even half-submerged, he moves with furious equine power and speed.

Loken stands up, nocks a third arrow, ignoring the sting of it in his hand, and shoots it through the approaching centaur's face. The sagittary shudders, his head snapping back, and he rolls onto his side, wallowing in the pool, floating for a few moments before slowly sinking into the glassy blackness.

The pool's chopped water sloshes against the stone sides, before slowly returning to stillness. Loken snaps the bow across his knee and casts it away. He recovers his sword. He can still trace the smudge of fire along its edge.

The maimed leader is on his side on the causeway, his huge, gleaming form panting and rasping, death squeezing the last gulps of breath out of him. His black skin, knotted with

muscle, is sheened with sweat. Dark blood from his severed limbs and the arrow in his belly forms a new mirror on the causeway stone.

'Oathbreaker!' he snorts at Loken, trying to turn his head.

'I kept my oaths,' Loken replies. 'I stood firm against all enemies. I kept brotherhood when others forsook it. I served the Luna Wolves, and maintained that proud name.'

The sagittary laughs, a ghastly sound thickened and choked by the blood in his throat. 'Did you uphold the confraternity of the Mournival, Loken? You did not!'

Loken walks around its body so he can look it in the eyes, though he has no wish to see the face it wears. That face, familiar from his beloved father, and so many of his brothers. It is flecked with blood, with a spittle of foam around its lips, and twisted in venomous rage towards him.

'I did,' Loken says. 'The duty of the Mournival was to stand counsel to our father. To guide him, and keep him ever true, even if our advice was not what he wanted to hear. We were meant to balance his errors of judgement. I never broke that duty. The Mournival failed, but I have never, ever forsaken that oath. I'm here to keep it, even now.'

The sagittary laughs, blood spraying from his mouth.

'This is how you keep your pledge to your primarch?' His voice is wheezing, mocking.

'The oath had many parts,' Loken replies. 'But all were contingent to the last and highest. To swear to uphold the truth of the Imperium of Mankind, no matter what evil may assault it. My father's truth is no longer that truth. It opposes it. It has become that assailing evil.'

The sagittary stares up at him, his breathing shallow and frayed.

'You honestly believe that, don't you?' he asks. 'You child. You vain, naive child. You think you are blameless, and have kept your promises, through all this horror–'

‘Seven years of horror,’ says Loken. ‘Seven years of loss. The greatest price we have ever paid for anything. I would give anything to undo what has been done. I will give anything to make it stop.’

‘You will!’ the centaur spits.

Loken nods. ‘I will. I accepted that when I took the oath. No matter the cost. That was our promise. A trillion lives to halt the darkness. Whatever it may take. No matter the cost.’

The sagittary starts to laugh again, gagging and coughing gore. Loken raises his sword to end its mockery and its misery.

‘You’re too late anyway,’ the sagittary says, looking up at him. ‘Far too late. While you have fought your vain fight to keep a meaningless pledge, the world has ended. There’s none of your truth left to fight for. The Imperium has gone, Loken. The Imperium is lost.’

Loken brings the sword down anyway.

10:x

Unmaker

There ought to be something to say. Something worthwhile, something brave. Something to mark a moment such as this.

But Vulkan doesn't know what it would be.

He has never been one for speeches, preferring deeds over words. But he has rallied men in his time, called out to armies on the windy fields of war, roused the spirits of battered legions, or spoken words of comfort to brothers in hours of ill fortune.

He can do it, but it is not natural to his disposition.

Would his brothers know what to say? Many of them, like Roboute, Rogal, Sanguinius, and even, in his time, Horus, were fine orators. Their words could win a battle before the first shot was fired. During the years of the Great Crusade, before it became a time quite devoid of glory, he saw them many times stand up before a sea of uncertain faces and mark the great moments of human history with their words.

He thinks they would all be quite speechless now.

This *is* history. History at its most defined and visible, history at its bitter end. How does any man mark that? The Chaos winds are so strong, they are turning the pages of history so fast that nothing can be written down, and nothing can be read. The book will soon be closed forever.

Why speak, then? Who will hear it? There is nothing left to rally and no one left to rouse. There is no great feat to follow this for which minds and hearts need to be uplifted and prepared. Besides, there is no one to remembrance his final words. Anything Vulkan says will be lost, and there will be no future generations to read that record anyway.

Vulkan has always been a man of deeds. His last deed remains, and it will speak for itself, straight to the ears of the betraying Warmaster. Horus will have no victory over them, only wormwood and gall. Whatever he claims as his triumph, it will be meaningless ashes.

Vulkan straightens up and beholds his work. The Talisman of Seven Hammers is prepared, aligned and set to its destructive purpose. Only his hands could have done that. Only he knew the secret precision of its apparatus. Only the great maker can unmake.

The heat upon him is fierce. Sparks whirl around him like a blizzard of unanchored stars.

All is set. He can make history, now, by unmaking it.

He walks down the steps of the Throne, the heat upon his back. The whole Throne Room is groaning and sighing, its fabric distressed and de-forming in the raging heat and the mounting discordia of the penetrating immaterium. The entire chamber, and the Palace around it, or what remains of it, is no longer a defined realspace structure. It is a phantom of materia, a liminal space, dissolving into the rising warp, leaving only a memory of its former self that becomes less solid with every passing moment. As history becomes harder and more solid than it has ever been before, manifesting like a real substance, the Palace blurs and loses its form.

They are waiting for him, the last of those who have stood by his side. They will end here with him. He pays them his respects. The Master of the Adnector Concillium, so wracked with damage his adepts have to hold him up to bow to Vulkan. Halferphess, his face burn-blistered, and Moriana Mouhausen of the Chosen, weeping. He thanks them all for their efforts. Abidemi stands tall, the tears in his eyes evaporating as they form. He tries to bow to Vulkan, but Vulkan embraces his son instead. No words.

Uzkarel Ophite attends too. The proconsul has left his Sentinels Pylorus at the Silver Door, through which the sounds of approaching havoc now ring close. The Sentinels will not

move. They will have their backs to the end when it comes. The last thing they will see is the glorious Silver Door rising to a sublime dazzle.

But Uzkarel has come, to signify the moment. His face is without expression.

'My Custodes can give you ten more minutes, eighteenth son,' he says. 'Fifteen, if the door holds and the fight that follows goes our way.'

'Minutes aren't going to make a difference, Uzkarel,' Vulkan replies. 'Not now. Our efforts are spent, and the Regent is perished. Our only commission now must be to make certain, *fully* certain, that the Warmaster claims nothing in his victory. We will scorn him with our last breath, and deny him, so we must make sure we take that last breath. He has made this ending, but we determine it.'

Uzkarel nods.

'I agree, my lord.'

The proconsul, like Abidemi, makes to bow, but Vulkan clasps his hand instead.

'By His will alone, Uzkarel,' says Vulkan. 'Always, until the end.'

It will surely be his end too, for even his Perpetual essence will not survive this annihilation.

Vulkan turns to make his last journey up the Throne steps and perform the deed that will be his last duty. He is sure there was somebody else, one other in the stalwart group, but he can't–

Her spectre waits for him at the foot of the steps. She is hard to see at the best of times, and hard to remember. In the furious light of the flames, she is barely there at all.

'Casryn,' he says. 'My apologies. I overlooked–'

My lord.

'There's no excuse. Your kind may be elusive to our conscious minds but–'

My lord Vulkan.

‘Do not try to gainsay me now, Kaeria. I respect and admire your perseverance, but my mind is set. This must be done now, before it can be stopped–’

My lord, can you not hear? Can none of you hear?

Vulkan pauses. There’s nothing to hear, nothing but the furnace roar of the Throne-pyre above them, the shrieking squeal of the engulfing immaterium, the gunshot crack of stone as it perishes in the heat and stress, the patter of molten gold as it drips from the high ceiling like rain.

The eternal spit and crackle of the warp.

‘Casryn, I–’

No. There’s a voice. There’s a voice inside that uproar. Faint, distant but strong. He can hear it as though it is calling from the flagstones of the floor, or the columns of the hall.

‘What is that?’ he whispers.

I do not know–

‘How… how are you the one to notice it, Casryn?’

Her shadow, so hard to see or focus on, shrugs.

I know not, she signs. *Perhaps because I am deaf to the howl of the warp–*

Vulkan turns, he looks around to locate the source of the sound. The others see him, and step forward, confused and apprehensive.

‘My Lord of Drakes–’ Abidemi begins.

Vulkan holds up his hand.

‘Listen!’ he orders. ‘Listen well, because it is hard to hear.’

They all stop, heads turning. One by one, they hear it too.

Sons and daughters of the Imperium of Man. Rise now. Rise up…

‘You all hear that, yes?’ Vulkan asks.

By the command of the Praetorian, take up your weapons and advance. The Emperor stands alone, at the hour of greatest peril. Take up your weapons and come to His aid. Protect Him as He protects you. You are the shield of humanity!

They nod, wondering.

Rise together and stand as one. Stand at His side now, or all is lost. Terra must endure. The Imperium must stand. Horus Lupercal must fall. The Emperor must live.

The words continue, repeating like an echo what they have said before.

'Is it a trick?' asks Abidemi.

'No,' says Halferphess. 'It has the clarity of truth–'

'But who would speak to us, in such a way?' Moriana Mouhausen asks.

Vulkan glances at her.

'I thought your guess might be the same as mine,' he replies. It can only be him, surely. Who else is there? The old man isn't dead and gone after all, and with his last breath and strength, he finally speaks from beyond the fire.

Vulkan hears the proof of it even as he thinks this. He hears, behind him, the tap of a walking staff coming closer – *tick! tick! tick!* – against the tiled floor. Malcador–

Vulkan swings around, but there's no one there. It's not the tap of a staff. It's the liquid drip of gold hitting the floor like raindrops.

Vulkan swallows his disappointment. It doesn't matter. *It doesn't matter*. All that matter are the words themselves. They have heard nothing for what seems like hours. There have been no messages or contacts from outside. The silence had convinced them that no one had survived, and that there was nothing left to fight for.

But these words change everything. Someone *is* still fighting. Someone, somewhere, *is* still alive, and alive enough to call

for arms and renewed strength. From the words, it is terribly plain that the threat remains, and the Imperium is far from saved. But the words contain hope. *True* hope. They tell Vulkan there is still a chance. That some possibility of salvation still exists.

And while it does, his deed is premature.

They must wait a little longer.

He strides away, and races up the golden steps into the heat to make the Talisman secure. For now, it must be withheld.

They must wait, in this wretched agony, a little more. Hope is still burning, not as bright as the Throne or the inferno of the Sanctum but, like Casryn, it is still there if only you know to look for it.

10:xi

The Bloodlit Crown

A final thread of hope remains for the last loyal sons of man.

The voice calls across the conflagrant Dominions and ruinous wastes of the Outer Palace, where few survive to heed it. It rings across the inferno of the Palatine, the greatest slaughterfield in human history, where the last remaining sons and daughters of the Imperium fight on in splintered cohorts against the overwhelming hosts of the traitor-foe, cut off, surrounded, their lines disintegrating as fast as their chances. For many of them, it is the last thing they will ever hear.

It echoes through sundered Eternity, and in past that gate, and into the final fortress, the Sanctum Imperialis, which has become the final feasting place of carnage, and no sanctum of any kind. This was the inviolable place, the bright citadel built to outlast time and history, and outlive dreams and the schemes of men. It was supposed to stand forever. Since the birth of the Imperium, the children of Terra have imagined many disasters and dangers, and foreseen calamities that they would have to guard against, but never did they conceive that the seat of Empire itself could be swept away, not even when the siege began. It would hold. It would endure, no matter what.

But now it falls, invaded from within and from without, its golden halls and soaring chambers set ablaze, and teeming with the conquering regiments of ruin. The voice rings out here too, but most of those to whom it speaks are too busy dying to hear its words.

It echoes across Terra itself, as the blazing Throneworld plunges into the maw of the warp, its material form digested by the alchemy of the empyric forces that envelop it. It echoes across firestorm continents and evaporated oceans, through

devastated cities and wasteland states, and is heard by those scant pockets of resistance that remain, defying the swarming foe to the last. Most of those who hear it in the midst of cataclysm dismiss it as a wishful fantasy, or another of the endless lies of Chaos.

The voice is very fragile. It offers hope, but nothing else, no promise of salvation, or respite, or word of victory reclaimed. Few, if any, ever identify the messenger, or learn the name of hope's envoy. They know it simply as the Praetorian's ultimate command, Dorn's last words to the defenders of Terra, the final wall that he is able to build to keep them safe, a wall of words alone, for all the solid walls of stone and steel he raised are perished and overthrown.

It is an idea of resistance, nothing more.

To some who hear it, like Fafnir Rann and Zephon Sorrow-Bringer at lost Hasgard, it is more than they ever dreamed to hear again. The frail hope it brings far exceeds anything they thought they would ever hear in what remained of their lives, for they had accepted death and consigned themselves long since. It puts strength back into their arms, and power into their blows, as they, and those few living souls still standing with them, oppose the overwhelming tide that has washed any trace of Hasgard Fortress away. None expect to live to see the hope realised. The voice is just an inspiring comfort as they strive to negotiate the highest prices for their lives.

To others, like Maximus Thane in the splintered plazas of the Inner Palace, assailed from all quarters by baying desecrators and the deluge of rout, it is a bitter, heartbreaking call that has come far too late.

To others, like Archamus, second of that name, in the field command of the Palatine catastrophe, or the seniors of the War Court in the besieged and smoke-choked Hegemon, it is a final, tantalising promise that makes them turn to their charts and cogitators one last time, and search for one last ploy or counter-move or gambit that could, as by some miracle,

overthrow the incontrovertible predictions of defeat their data has been producing for hours.

Even at the very source of the voice, at the desolate black mansion, hope is dying, stillborn, for the Archenemy has heard the call too, and turns towards its source. The hosts of Chaos and Neverborn, offended by the words, emerge from the horizon's smoke, feral banners high, and begin to converge across the endless tracts of mud, to crush Agathe's last redoubt and silence it. She sees them coming, from every point that her compass can no longer identify, and orders her gunlines to load and prepare.

War makes noise. Its death song is deafening. Across the territories of its madness, the voice is, for the most part, not heard at all, for it is drowned out by the booming hymn of the red.

Or it is lost in the soughing whispers of neverness, which have been a constant murmur since the war began, and now rise to a crescendo. The Neverborn whispers are incandescent with outrage. There is nothing, *nothing*, that enrages them more than to see the generous gifts of Chaos shunned or spurned. To witness the Bloodlit Crown, the greatest honour that Chaos can bestow, rejected, is an insult that fires them with rancour.

To see it abused as a weapon, its generosity defiled, turns the whispers into shrieks.

The Emperor hears the voice, though the neverness storm rages around the walls of the Lupercal Court. It is a tiny thing, one grain of sand in a desert storm, one murmur among a trillion screams. It is not enough, nothing *like* enough. It is not the shield of humanity that will fortify Him to triumph, or replenish His ravaged body.

But it is enough to allow Him to stand, the bloody Bloodlit Crown in His hand. It is enough to force His first-found son into blind fury. The Master of Mankind has lost, but He can yet deprive Horus of his triumph. He will force His son to kill

Him, for better the death and loss of everything, than eternity at his side as a grinning puppet-regent of the Old Four.

You put your face back on. The front of your skull is so ruptured and wrenched open, like a split fruit or the husk of a seed, you fear for a moment that the power inside you, the power that you have become, will spill out of the cracked shell of the human you once were, or that some new and still-more-terrible form of you will escape from your human rind.

You maintain your physical integrity. You push the hinged-open part of your skull back in place, reknit the bones, re-form the muscles and the flesh, and heal the skin unblemished. The severed dermal tubes and pipes across your scalp and cheek regrow like the creeping roots of trees, and re-socket themselves with a sibilant hiss of steam and a whir of machined connectors.

You repair yourself. And you maintain your mental composure despite the indignity of your father's underhand assault. You are strong. You're Horus Lupercal. You reflect that your father's uncompromising defiance is quite admirable. It is who He is. He has not relented once in His life, and for most of yours, you have worshipped that fortitude. His steadfast mien is what made Him great even when you hated Him.

His unwavering strength is the very reason you love Him and despise Him. You are His son, so you have inherited His character and His traits. This is reassuring. If He is strong, then so are you.

So you will not give up either. You will not bend or break. You will remain resolute and patient, those hallmarks of a truly great king, and not give in to the homicidal coal of anger that burns in your heart, the impulse to shred Him apart in a welter of blood for His insolent perfidy.

That would be too easy. Too weak. The act of a child. You will deny Him the satisfaction of making you snap, and deprive Him absolutely of the pyrrhic victory He seeks. You

will not give Him the death He wants. You will not cheat yourself.

You will make Him accept the fate you have ordained.

You rise.

He has recovered His war-sword. He must have been feigning before, because He stands unaided, and displays some vitality of body and spirit that seemed previously to have drained from Him. He has the Bloodlit Crown. He raises it in His claws and shatters it so you can watch it break.

'I can make another,' you tell Him. 'I can make a thousand more. I can make as many as I need to make until you are too weak to shake them off your brow.'

You tell Him you can take His pain away, for only pain awaits Him if He persists with this. You can spare Him that pain as He never spared you yours.

You can tell He thinks that you know nothing of pain.

On the contrary, father. I have been the surrogate of your pain. I was born to channel it, just like all my brothers. We were made to bear your pain for you, and suffer it on your behalf. One by one, we have all discovered this. Some, like Ferrus, understood it too late. Some, like Konrad, are broken by it, or are driven into madness to escape it, like Lorgar or Fulgrim. Some, it has compressed to the dullest mettle, like Perturabo or Rogal. Some flee from it, like Russ or Jaghatai, hoping they can outrun it. Some, like Magnus and Roboute, strive in vain to please you so that you might take the pain away.

Some, like poor, naive Sanguinius, think they can spare you by accepting it completely.

'Only I have defied you,' you tell Him. 'Only I have turned and said that I reject it, for it is no way a father should treat His sons. Only I have the strength to condemn you, and return the gift you cursed us with. You should be proud of me, for I alone have exceeded your wildest expectations.'

He is not listening. A father, it seems, cannot bear to hear when His son enumerates His failings. Will you be the same, when the time comes, and your sons turn to you with their discontents? Not the sons you have, for they, save one, have embraced your outlook and would never think to question your decisions. They are but drones, toys of war, sired only to fight and not to think, so they will simply do your bidding and never form an opinion that matters.

No, the sons you have yet to father. The pantheon of primarch sons, and daughters too, that you will sire and bring into the world, your Neverborn children of ageless wisdom and endless power, who will rule the provinces and demesnes of your realm until the stars go out. They will be transcendent, and they will supplant the boorish, single-minded simpletons who were spawned from your genetics and currently call themselves your sons. Their time, and their purpose, is done. The dynasty of sons and daughters you will nurture after this will be sublime wonders, and you will love every one of them. Of course you will listen when they raise complaint, for they will be your equals and your blood, and you will gladly respect all issues they might bring to you.

Though there will be none to answer. Ever. No child of yours will ever confront you, for you will never give them cause. You will never make errors. You will be perfect.

Make no mistakes. That's what your father taught you, and it's the only thing He ever taught you that you intend to honour.

Starting now. You will not give Him long enough to recover further. You attack Him directly, and without compromise.

You stride directly towards Him, and swing your maul with such force the head of it produces a sonic boom. He avoids it, just, and thrusts with His war-sword. The blade splits your refractors and slides deep into your belly.

You let it. He wrenches it out and manages to back-step fast enough to avoid the swipe of your Talon. He ducks aside, and slices with His sword, cleaving your refractors a second time

and hacking almost a third of the way into your torso just above the hip.

You let Him.

He pulls the blade free, and circles you. A feint, then another, then a superb thrust that drives the war-sword through your central body-mass.

You let Him.

You draw the warp into you so that He can see it. You need to make Him understand, for He does not seem to have grasped it yet, despite that acclaimed wisdom He boasts of. Your power is infinite. His is not. No matter how many times He gets back up, to renew the fight for another desperate go-around, He is merely postponing the inevitable. He is a warp-attuned creature of great power, by any mortal standards, and rightly has been feared His entire life. But His great strength is finite. You are an infinite being of the infinite warp. Your power will never run out, and can never be sapped, no matter how many or how grievous the injuries He inflicts upon you. You cannot be killed.

This contest was over before it began. It was superfluous. You only permitted the fight to take place at all because He seemed to need it. It was all for show, a demonstration of your new-found state, a symbolic, ritual act to consecrate your reign. You fight only to wear Him down to nothing until He is rendered entirely helpless and subject to your will.

Surely He sees that now?

The pair of you circle. He strikes at you again, then again, a thousand thrusts with His sword, a thousand raking blows with His claws. Each one dapples the floor with your blood. You let them all land. You let the minutes pass, the hours, the wounds. For every two or three blows He lands, you hammer with your maul, or tear with your Talon. Some of these strikes land, but most are simply thrown to make Him duck and dodge, weave and retreat. You are eroding His strength, His stamina and His will. As He begins to slow, you find yourself pulling blows

that would have killed Him. No death today. No death for Him. No escape to the freedom of agonised oblivion from the fate you have wrought to contain Him.

Still you circle, filling the Court with the ring of steel and the breathless gasps of His effort. This contest has become pure ceremony, pure spectacle, a rite of sacrifice to tear out His will and offer it to the gods. It has lasted a thousand years already. It will last another thousand, another ten thousand, another million, if needs be. You have all the time you need.

His fatigue begins to hang from Him like a cloak of lead, bowing His shoulders and dragging His steps. You can see the misery in His eyes, the curdling, thickening exhaustion. He has tried everything, to no avail. You are letting Him see the wounds He scores upon you, and the indifference with which you regard them. You are letting Him verify the implacable nature of your immortality. It is not like His. His can be ended. Yours cannot.

You control your rage. You bite back physical pain, for it is transient, and you let go of any resentment, for it serves no purpose. He bruised you when He first arrived and seemed to look through you. It hurt when He would not acknowledge you. You are past that now. You have been maturating all this time, and the stages of your duel have allowed you to learn and grow into your new self. You are calm and sanguine. You understand now that when He came to your Court, He ignored you because He was scared. He hurt you because He didn't know what else to do. He did not acknowledge you because you were no longer you, and He did not recognise you. He saw what you had become, a fathomless power that He could not compete with, and He lashed out in petty ways to wound you, like any frightened soul cornered by the absolute.

You are past that now.

You have become one with the divinity invested in you, and He has lost.

It's not your father's power, it's how you grind it out of Him until He begs you to relent.

He tries to melt the deck, to blow out the entire floor and cast you down through the levels of the ship. You do not fall, for everything in this place obeys your will, including the very air that holds you up, and gravity, which is anxious not to offend you. With your mind, you wrench up one of the five thrones from its foundation. It was the one you prepared for the Angel. He will not be needing it.

You throw it at your father.

His ailing willpower swells, and suffuses His blade, and He demolishes the throne into a million fragments with a frantic slice of His sword. You pluck up the thrones intended for Constantin and Rogal too. They will not be required either, for two thrones will suffice.

With the last shred of His will He annihilates Constantin's throne in mid-air before it can smash into Him.

He has nothing left to stop Rogal's.

He disappears beneath its granite bulk, mashed backwards and crushed into the deck.

The rubble of the throne, some pieces weighing a tonne or more, heaps upon Him like a cairn. When you send them flying with your mind, He does not move. He lies flat, like the recumbent effigy of a king on the lid of a tomb, swathed in dust. He is barely breathing.

You pause to fashion a new crown in your hand. As the bloodlight threads weave and form between your Talon's claws, you step forward.

Reality splits open in your path, and two men slither out of the material tear like newborn lambs from an amniotic sac.

An odd, belated arrival. The pair of them are just human. They steam with immaterial vapour, and they are wet with thawing interstitial ice. They stink of the distances of empyric space, as though their journey has been wayward and long, from one end of time to the other.

Have they come to kneel at your feet? They are both dazed, disorientated, confused by the abruptness of their arrival after a voyage so long.

They look up at you. An instant of recognition. A fleeting moment of shock as they realise where they are.

You see the sudden and utter terror in their eyes, and know that it is fully justified. They have made a tragic mistake of navigation, and a colossal error of judgement.

You feel sorry for them.

10:xii

The Guardsman

‘Oh god,’ says Oll Persson.

He’s disorientated. Cold. Soaked to the bone. He hasn’t even made sense of where he is. His thoughts are dizzy and shaken loose. But a shadow has fallen across him.

The shadow is Horus. That’s all Oll understands, and all that matters.

Beside him, tangled up with him, for they have spilled out onto the deck together, Oll feels John Grammaticus begin to shake in abject terror. He hears John whimper in inarticulate distress.

John is looking up, and seeing the same thing.

The shadow is Horus.

Horus gazes down on them. There is a hint of puzzlement in the Warmaster’s expression. It’s hard to tell. His face is not human. The expression is impossible to read.

Oll’s limbs go weak and slack. His guts knot. His fight-or-flight response stalls completely, for neither option is possible.

They are right at his feet. *Right at his feet*. He stands over them, so huge, so tall, so broad, so malevolently eclipsing. They knew the knife’s cut would bring them close to him, for his shadow was the only thing they could plot their course towards. But this is not the same part of the inevitable realm, or the same room. This is right at his feet. Oll could stretch out his hand and touch him.

Though he won’t, because he can’t. His body is locked in horror. His mind is fossilised with fear. He’s forgotten how to breathe or blink.

Horus. Horus Lupercal. Warmaster. The monster is not those things any more. It is a giant shape cut out of the empyrean's blackest cloth. It is malice incarnate. It is the void in a titanic humanoid shape.

Oll is paralysed with absolute dread.

The abomination shifts. It reaches down towards them to annihilate them with talons as long and lightless as Old Night.

John finally finds his voice. He speaks the only word his dumbstruck mind will process.

He screams it at the shadow looming over them.

It's the word he learned from Oll's dream at Hatay-Antakya. It's the word not spoken in the material galaxy since the tower at Babilin fell.

It–

Sound ceases. There is a silent concussion that implodes the world. Deaf, dumb, blind, Oll feels gravity crush him into paste.

Nothing, then something in the nothing that feels like pain, then something shaking that pain. Someone. John's shaking him. Sound and vision swirl back, crooked and distorted. John's face over him, blood around his lips.

'–up! Get up! Get up! Get up, Oll! Get up!'

Oll sits up, sucking in air. All sounds are wrong, dull, hollowed, flat. Both sides of his neck are wet with the blood seeping from his punished ears. His teeth feel too big for his mouth. Every nerve is stretched and screaming. Every cell is bruised.

'Oll!'

Oll blinks. Forty metres away, across the derelict chamber, a huge dark mass lies on its back. It is smoking, as though a fire has been left to smoulder inside it. Black war plate is cracked and splintered. Nearby, a war-maul longer than Oll is tall lies

on the scabbed deck. It fell there when its owner was thrown backwards by John's single word.

'I don't think it's dead,' John is gabbling. 'I don't think – Oll? I don't think it's dead–'

He's frantic, pawing at Oll as he yanks him to his feet. He's talking so fast, with such a level of panic, Oll can feel the droplets of blood flying from John's split lips hitting his cheek.

Oll turns, swaying, trying to stay upright. He smells the sour metal stink of a ship, the smoke, the acrid aftertaste of violence. He sees the decaying hall of a voidship around him, the dirty ouslite deck, the scree of debris, the brass walls crusted with calcification.

He sees the other body. It's not far away. It would have been behind them when they tumbled out of nowhere. It's surrounded by rubble and coated in white dust. It isn't moving.

'Oh god,' he gasps. He blunders towards it, trying to remember how to walk. John is pulling at him, clawing, cursing, babbling profanities and nonsense and hysteria.

'We have to go!' John yells at him. 'We *have* to! We have to leave! Oll! We have to *go*!'

'John!' Oll barks, pulling free from the man's grip. He stumbles on.

Behind him, John calls his name plaintively.

The Emperor is prostrate. The dust on Him and around Him is fine and dry like lunar regolith. It cakes Him so completely that the gilt finish of His armour can no longer be seen. The only colour visible is scarlet, where the dust has clotted with blood. There are so many wounds.

Oll drops to his knees beside the Master of Mankind. He touches Him, and feels nothing but cold. There seems to be no breath, no movement.

'Please,' Oll murmurs. 'You have to… You have to live. Just live. Everything ends if…'

He doesn't know what to say.

John's standing over him. 'We have to get out, Oll,' he says. 'It's finished. We're too late.'

'Yes,' says Oll, not looking up. 'Go. Now. You go. Right now.'

'Oll–'

'I mean it.' Oll kneels forward, his hand on the Emperor's breastplate. The body is so very huge. 'Please,' he whispers to it. 'I came back. I had to. I have something.'

The knife is still in his hand. He holds it out, like an offering, as though the close proximity of such an object might stir some response.

'Please, live,' Oll says. 'You can use this. I brought it for you so you can use it. I think it can… I don't know. Please, answer me. Please. You can't die. Everything falls if you die.'

'Oll.'

He glances up. John is staring down at him, calmer now. Solemn.

'We're too late,' says John. 'We have to go. It's not dead. We have to go.'

'Then go.'

'Both of us. I'm supposed to protect you. I promised–'

'You have. You did. You just did. You protected me all the way here, John. But you have to go.'

'Oll–'

'I'm serious,' says Oll. 'You have to go immediately. While there's still a chance. Get out.' Oll rummages in his pocket. He pulls out the ball of thread, and holds it out to John. 'You know why.'

John won't take it from him.

'Take it, Grammaticus! Bloody take it and *go*! As fast as you can! You know what you have to do! If you don't, we'll never

get here–'

'It doesn't matter!' John snarls. 'We're too late! We got here too late! So it doesn't bloody *matter* if we get here or not! We don't make it in time–'

'We still have to be there to stop the Dark King–'

'Oh, who bloody *cares*?' John snaps. 'Nothing matters any more, Persson! It was all a waste! It was all futile! Just get the hell up and come with me! Now!'

Oll sits back on his heels, knife in one hand, the thread in the other. He stares at the Emperor.

'Please,' he says softly.

The Emperor's head turns slowly towards him. His eyelids flicker.

'Did you see that?' Oll asks.

'Yes,' says John.

'You saw it?'

'Yes!'

Oll stands up. 'Then we're not too late, are we?' he says. He presses the ball of thread into John's reluctant hands. 'You've got to take it, John, and you've got to go. It's not too late, but we have to find our way here. We *have* to. So it all depends on you. Don't screw it up, all right?'

'But–'

'For god's sake, Grammaticus. This is the one thing that matters. Do it for me, please.'

'Oll–'

Oll stares at him. John sighs, a long, slow exhalation. He wipes his mouth, then nods.

'I don't think it's dead, Oll,' he says.

'I'm pretty sure it isn't,' Oll agrees. 'So go right now while you can. Find something sharp–'

‘I know how it works.’

‘And the knots? You remember how to t–’

‘I can bloody tie them, Oll.’

‘Right. Good. Goodbye, John.’

Grammaticus hesitates.

‘I’ll see you sometime,’ he says.

Oll nods.

With a final, muttered curse of frustration, John turns and walks away. Oll watches him go. John reaches the chamber’s long colonnade, where Luna Wolves once stood at perfect attention. He’s scanning the ground, searching the litter of debris for a chunk of stone or a broken piece of tile that will have a sharp enough edge. He disappears into the shadows of the colonnade.

They’ll never see each other again.

Oll kneels back down at the Emperor’s side. There has been no further sign of life.

‘I brought this knife,’ he says, as though resuming a casual conversation. ‘It’s… Well, you’ll understand what it is, I’m sure. You’ll feel it. You can use it. I think it might be the only thing you can use. Here–’

He holds it out. There’s no response. He tries to lift the Emperor’s hand, but it’s too big and too heavy. He settles for pressing the knife into its grip, and trying to close the armoured fingers around it. The knife looks so small in that hand. Ridiculous.

‘So, you’ve got it now. All you have to do is… is wake up. Be alive. Be alive and get up. It isn’t over. So I’m really hoping, you know, that you can hear me, and that you’re going to get up any second now. Get up. Oh, come *on*.’

He sits back.

‘We had a plan,’ he says. ‘Remember? You had a plan. A great big plan. It still matters. I’m going to help you with it. You asked me to. Do you remember that? You asked me to help you get it right this time. Advise you. Keep you true. Keep you moving in the right direction. And I will. I *will*, this time. I promise you. Not like before. I’ll stand right beside you, and I’ll help you to make it work. For everybody’s sake. All you’ve got to do is get up.’

He breathes hard. He can feel the pulse thumping in his neck.

‘Please, friend. My old friend. Please.’

Oll looks down at the knife to make sure it hasn’t slipped out of the slack fingers. He sees something on the deck, covered in a thick layer of dust. He brushes the grit aside. Two cards from the Imperial Tarot, dropped, discarded. Both wafers are scorched around the edge.

He picks them up. *The Guardsman*, stalwart with his rifle. *The Lantern*, sending its frail beam into the night.

‘That’s you and me, then,’ Oll says, looking at them. ‘You and me.’

He lays *The Lantern* on the Emperor’s dusty chestplate carefully. He stares at *The Guardsman* and then tucks it in his breast pocket.

‘All you have to do is get up,’ he says. He can suddenly feel his left eyelid fluttering.

Something stirs. A skitter of loose debris. A scrape of metal.

The Emperor is as still and silent as before.

Oll looks behind him.

Across the chamber, the black shape is shifting. It twitches like a scarab on its back. It stirs.

Horus slowly sits up, and hauls himself upright.

Horus rises.

Horus stands.

Black bone and blacker light fume around him, repairing and restoring the burned materia of his wargear and his flesh. He is as terrible as before, more terrible, more awful, unbearable, a black mass lit from within by a ghastly, bloody light.

He takes a step forward, then another, his pace increasing into a stride. Each footstep shakes the deck and rings out like a falling tank.

Oll gets up.

'You have to wake up, now,' he says urgently.

Horus approaches, wordless, furious.

'You really have to get up now,' Oll calls. 'Please. Get up. Get the hell up.'

Horus is closing. The Warmaster reaches out a huge hand. The immense maul scrapes across the deck with a shriek, and then flies straight into his grip.

Oll steps forward to face him. He puts himself between the Emperor and the oncoming monster. He pulls his lasrifle off his shoulder, arms it, and aims it. He knows there's no point, but it's better than nothing.

'Get up now!' he yells over his shoulder. 'Please, get up now!'

Horus is just metres away. He's not slowing down.

Oll pulls the rifle in against his cheek, flexes his grip, and settles his finger on the trigger.

'No further!' he yells. 'Damn you! I won't let you touch Him!'

Horus keeps coming. Oll opens fire. Full-auto, sustained. The las-bolts flick and spatter off the black war plate like candle flames in a night wind.

Oll Persson is still firing when the Talon of Horus reduces him to a drifting red fog.

Oll Persson stands his ground against Horus.

10:xiii

A tower of silence

A rain of blood falls on the Hollow Mountain, drenching the crags, the fighting platforms and the churning lines of warriors, and washing the snow and black rock alike dark red.

A rain of blood to herald a reign of blood.

To Corswain, caught in a whirling, clanging thicket of war plate ten men deep, it feels as though the heavens are haemorrhaging. Sickly, thrombotic veins of lightning thread and bulge the feverish, yellow sky, a sky that drapes as low across the lonely mountain as a shroud. The light is saffron, the glower of a diseased sunset. Thunder groans and heaves like the ferment of a bloated cadaver. The air is blistered with flies and atomised gore.

The battle will not cease.

The din of it, the grinding metal roar and the constant drumfire, drowns out even the raging elements. Every time Corswain thinks the pressure is about to ease, and the enemy assault about to tip back into retreat, the ferocity increases.

Since the long battle for the Hollow Mountain began, the Death Guard onslaughts have come in waves, and he has lost count of how many there have been. The enemy has flooded the deep pass, and eroded still more of Corswain's force, but each time his men have driven them back. This time, however…

This time is different. It has lasted four times as long as any previous assault, and it shows no sign of relenting. This is, he supposes, the final push. After multiple escalades to wear them down, reduce their numbers, and exhaust their munitions, the Death Guard is resolved to finish it. Perhaps Typhus has grown frustrated and impatient. Perhaps this brutal attrition

was his tactic all along. Perhaps the whole war is lost, and the last pocket of loyalist resistance must be stamped out.

It is a havoc pitch. Corswain is raking, blood-blinded, at anything that comes at him, which is everything, all the time. The previous waves of assault were the most gruelling and brutal he has experienced in his life. They pale by comparison. This is the gigantomachy of legend, the war of men and bestial gods, where skill and valour count as nothing, and only the purest fury can prevail. His blade is now so notched it looks serrated.

Sigismund, barely ten metres from the seneschal along the contested ledge, drives his smoking black sword into snorting charcoal hulks and spills them down the cliff. He too feels the finality of the battle. It is outlandishly savage, as though the enemy warriors dare not fall back, for fear of their commander's displeasure. They would rather die on these lethal crags than face their master's wrath. They fear the very power that they serve.

And they *do* die, by the dozen, by the score. But they do not die alone. The defenders of the last mountain are being cut down, and their numbers are dwindling. Artolun has just been speared by two Death Guard pikes, his thrashing body lifting clear of the tight-packed melee before dropping into the brawling sea of armour. Pontis has fallen, clutching his lacerated neck. The clifftop is littered with broken plate segments and pieces of men. Blood streams off the parapet edge, and lifts on the howling wind in a horsetail spray.

Typhus, undoubtedly, must see the state of the fight as clearly as Sigismund. He must see that the mountain is on the brink of falling. Thus he has committed his regiments for a last, merciless attack. It is just the same in a fight, man to man. When you see your opponent begin to slow, when you read the signs that he is finally tiring, you drive in with a last measure of resolve to exploit that weakness and end the fight.

And so, this carnage. Carnage here, at *Gateway Cliff*, in mind-numbing intensity, with no room to breathe or think.

Carnage at *Knife Edge* and *Axe-Beard Ledge* and *West Shelf* and all the other tiers of the cliff defence that Adophel so hastily named. Carnage everywhere. Every bulwark and platform at the head of the pass is the same, every man fighting for his life, or dead, every rock face crawling with the ascending foe. Black plate, gleaming steel, throats raw from yelling, mouths sour from ingested blood.

The voice that spoke, his Praetorian's command, urged them to stand firm. Words have no power here.

Sigismund sees Typhus first. He shouts a warning that the world is too loud to hear.

From his place at the edge of *Gateway Cliff*, Sigismund sees the swarming enemy numbers far below part to allow their lord's advance. Drawn in some hellish chariot, and flanked by his retinue of champions, Typhus hastens along the base of the pass to lead his men in the final assault. War-horns boom. The Death Guard in the clifftop vanguard redouble their efforts. Their lord approaches. They will clear a path for him.

Sigismund yells his warning again. But the champion in him sees a new opportunity, the chance to close, face to face, with the enemy lord. This was impossible before, but now Typhus openly presents himself. He is coming within reach, and Sigismund's black sword is waiting for him.

Sigismund shouts to rally those few of his Seconds still nearby. With their support, he can hold the cliff and make ready. Perhaps, he thinks, we can drive a way down the ridge, through the flanking line of assault, and meet him on the way up. Typhus will have to abandon that damn chariot, and advance in narrow file with his retinue. The cliffs are too–

The war-horns boom again. Bone trumpets blast the air.

Sigismund gazes in horror, his plans disintegrating before they are even fully formed. He sees his enemy properly now. He sees what is coming.

Typhus, lord of the enemy host, carrion chieftain, rises from the murk of the pass. He has not abandoned his chariot at all.

He ascends from the pitch-black depths of the gorge as though the darkness below is exhuming him, and lifting him into the winter light. He does not scale the sheer cliff like his swarming men, he rides the air itself, a daemon-deity of extinction borne aloft by the fly-specked murk and noxious vapour. His ascent is stately and majestic. He stands on his chariot of wet bone, the open clam shell of a giant ribcage. Every inch of that bone is scrimshaw-etched with the letters and characters of Death's alphabet: requiem odes and funerary prayers from the books of the dead held sacred by a thousand civilisations that are themselves long perished from the world. Only their words remain, notched into the bones, hymns that worship Death and acknowledge its inescapable triumph over life. The bones are singing, an eerie witch-blood song that skirls in the freezing air.

Typhus is a behemoth, his bulk increased by fluted cancerous plate, by filth-matted spikes, and by the vast fly-swarm, a living cloak, that breathes and plumes from the black-bone chimneys and seeping orifices of his hunched shell-back. He is flanked by macabre champions who make Skulidas Gehrerg seem but a minor impediment. They ride on the skirts of the chariot around him, beneath flapping, cracking banners of human skin. They are all skull-masked, their war plate anointed with white bone-ash and symbols of mortality writ in tomb-dust. Their weapons are drawn ready: embalming knives and mortuary hammers, dissection blades and necropsy chisels, the copper adzes to open the mouth, the excerebration hooks to empty the skull. They are his priesthood, come to officiate the exequies of the First Legion and its allies. His creaking chariot is drawn upwards by moaning Neverborn of plague and decay. They are his mourners, come to bear his skeletal chariot up the cliff like some rotting gift to the mountain. They are gnarled, contorted things, buckled by carcinoma and neoplasmic cyst, and veiled with soil-stained winding sheets that trail and billow in the wind. They are yoked to the foul chariot by rusted chains, and their broken fingernails claw at the dirty air to find purchase in it to drag the dead-cart ever upwards. Red sprite lightning, baleful and

luminous, drifts and sparks in the foul air around the slow cortege.

Typhus brings the howl of the storm with him, for it is his own utterance.

Corswain hears the horror approaching before he sees it. The keening bone-song tells the seneschal that this is no longer a battle, not in any way his Legion would measure it. It is a funeral rite.

He cuts his way forwards, leaving bodies maimed and sliced in his wake. He sees Typhus ascending. This is a ceremony of death indeed, and Corswain and his brothers are not the deceased to be honoured. The Hollow Mountain isn't a battle site, it is a sacrificial altar, and the priests are here.

We ascend. The foretold glory of Chaos is upon us, and upon Terra. So we sing, so the bones around us sing.

In the necrologies of ancient days, the slaves and retainers of a king's household were ritually put to death as a preface to an ultimate rite, so that they might serve their lord in the afterlife. The libation will be Corswain, and his men, and their allies, and the million souls inside the last mountain. This, the bone-song of the Old Four has decreed. The delight of it rots the air. We are death, and we know better than any the arts and observances that must mark a great passing.

We, beloved of those outer powers, have been given a new, ceremonial task, and we have accepted it without question. The joy of it burns in our blood like a fever. The conquest of the First Legion and the mountain, to which our forces have committed their strengths, is no longer a military objective, or even an act of vengeance. It has become the first stage of a high ritual, a preparatory offering. We are ascending to attend a much greater ceremony, and officiate as high celebrants at a much greater death.

We know whose death that is. Only one extinction could be great enough to warrant such ostentatious ceremony. Chaos is

assembling in solemn grace to attend the committal of its greatest foe.

The mountain is an altar indeed. It is a tower of silence where the corpse of the Emperor will be laid out and picked clean.

We ascend. We are blessed eightfold. We are Typhus.

‘Deny him!’ Corswain yells into the wind. ‘Deny him!’

Does he mean Typhus? Does he mean the Warmaster? Does he mean Death itself? It hardly matters. His warriors close round to hold the cliff.

But how can they? Typhus and his heresiarchs are instruments beyond mortal power, engorged with immaterial energy by the warp that drowns the terrestrial globe. This is a fight no swords, not even Sigismund’s blade, can stop.

Typhus seems to hear him. His regal chariot draws up to the lip of the rampart. He bows his head, accepts the crown of femurs that his attendants bring, and begins his dedication of the Great Rite, the order and oblations of which have been dictated to him by the Grandfather he adores. This offering, to mark the death of an old king and the coronation of a new one, must be made with exacting care.

The loyal First will be the last to die. In their blood, and their hearts torn beating from their chests and held aloft as tribute, the new age of Chaos Absolute will be sanctified.

His Neverborn ushers leap onto the rock, and sprinkle bonemeal gathered from the Palace battlefields to mark a path for him to walk. His champions chant the bone-song, and swing censers made of polished skulls to perfume the air with the smoke of human fat.

Typhus steps down. Some of the First Legion break clear of the raging fight and rush towards him, as though eager to become the first sacrifices.

The charnel lord’s scythe reaps their souls, just as it will reap the souls of all those defending the cliffs. Lives end, black armour splits, and Angels of Caliban die in pieces. The chains

of skulls that drape Typhus clatter like a death rattle as he moves. The air thickens with a cesspit stink from the reek of him. He strides onto the rampart, the rock dripping pus as his virulence touches it. He is not a warrior that can be fought, man against man. He is a pestilential force, a witch-blooded malignancy that comes like a delirium, a wild, carcinogenic ecstasy, to blight the lives of loyal men. Cutting a path towards him, Sigismund knows this.

Sigismund salutes him anyway.

'Further active resonance,' Tanderion reports. In the deep, cold vault, they all look up, watching the striated lights pulsing from somewhere within the living rock. Even the old blind man, Zhi-Meng, seems to be watching them.

'My friend,' says Zhi-Meng, 'we have the right technique, however improvised it may be. The lore applied by you and your brothers, the psychic engrams… It is acute. We have the raw materials too. All these hoping minds. Even though the mountain lacks the ancient psychocircuitry and telepathic conduits that once regulated its operation, I think some wonder is within our grasp.'

Cartheus shakes his head. 'The warp is on us, my lord,' he says. 'Nothing works as we predict it. We perform one work, certain of its effect, yet the results are not as we expect. Nothing works the same way within the warp.'

'I think we might use that fact to our advantage,' Zhi-Meng replies. 'These unique circumstances could be exploited in our favour.'

He turns his blind eyes towards the coloured light throbbing in the heart of the stone once more.

'It is unstable, though,' he murmurs.

'And no wonder,' Tanderion replies. 'The workings we have made to support the geophonics are hasty and unfinished, and the apparatus of the Astronomican destroyed–'

'But what does that *mean*?' asks Leeta Tang. Several members of the conclave have gathered to watch the work. 'It

sounds like you're talking about… magic.'

'Well, it would,' says Zhi-Meng. 'The mountain is a sacred space, a liminal place. Through its age, and permanence, and its alignment, it connects what you would think of as real with something quite other. You might as well call it magic.'

'I will, then,' says Leeta. 'But what does it mean?'

'It means we are trying to light a lamp with no oil, no wick, and only one flint,' says Zhi-Meng.

'The instability is more than that,' says Cypher, stepping from the shadows to join them. 'The woman Keeler has quite successfully unified the assembled masses into a psychoacoustic unity. I did not think it feasible, but they seem to follow her with great devotion. Their meaningless… incantations…'

'Prayers, my lord,' says Zhi-Meng. 'If we can glibly use words like "magic" then we can call them prayers. They may be meaningless of themselves, but they supply a mantra, a focus, through which the force of will can be directed. They are like the drone harmonic that my choirs adopt in order to establish counterpoint and harmony. The words themselves don't matter, it is the focus they provide. But you are quite correct. There is instability. A disruptive counter-harmonic–'

They listen. The roar of war outside is all too apparent despite the thickness of the rock surrounding them. It echoes through the vaults and chambers of the Hollow Mountain. There is a song entwined with it, a song of bone and slaughter.

'The enemy has a prayer of its own,' says Cypher. 'The warp suffuses us all. You call this mountain a sacred space, Lord Zhi-Meng, but it is not. Nothing is sacred. It is sensitive, but neutral, and it responds to the will of any who come near. The counter-harmonic is the echo of our enemy's will. It dilutes and weakens the chorus Keeler is orchestrating.'

'Fear weakens it.'

Cypher glances aside. The soldier, Katsuhiro, is standing with the others of the conclave, the child held to his chest.

‘It’s just fear, sir,’ he says. ‘The people hear that sound, and it scares them. It breaks their focus.’ He shrugs, weary. ‘I don’t know much about it,’ he says. ‘But I know fear.’

‘He’s right,’ says Zhi-Meng.

‘Can’t you… block the enemy’s prayer, my lord?’ asks Wereft.

Cypher glances at his Librarians.

‘The enemy has a host of psykers,’ says Cartheus. ‘We have but a handful.’

‘We could interrupt for a few seconds,’ says Asradael, ‘but we couldn’t sustain–’

‘A spark only takes a second to catch,’ says Zhi-Meng.

Cypher thinks for a moment. His silver mask gleams in the candlelight.

‘You two with me,’ he says to Tanderion and Asradael. ‘Cartheus, stay here, and be ready to coordinate the resonance. Direct it swiftly when it builds. You’ll only have those seconds. One chance. My lord, please tell Keeler to make ready to focus her efforts. She must bring them all together, no matter their fear.’

He says no more. Cypher leads his two Librarians to the flight of basalt stairs that will take them to the Tertiary Portal. Cartheus sighs, and places his hands splayed against the cold rock wall.

Wereft leads Zhi-Meng through the crowded chambers to Keeler’s side. Eild, Tang and the other members of the conclave follow.

The great stone chambers are filled with the refugees of the pilgrimage. Packed into the mountain’s vast vaults, there seems far more of them than when they were stretched out to the horizon in a thread. They are all murmuring in soft voices, repeating Keeler’s words, or the echoes of them as they spread through the hollow compartments. There is a constant, hushing

noise, an immense collective whisper, like the surge of a distant sea.

Keeler still stands on the stone plinth, her arms raised.

‘The Emperor must live,’ she is saying. She has repeated it so many times, that the words have lost their sense. They are simply a sound, a reassurance, to which people can fix and cling, as important yet meaningless as ‘north’. ‘The Emperor is the shield and protector of humanity, and we are His shield in turn. He lives because we yet live. He is the Imperium, and the Imperium is us. While we persist, His light cannot fail. Lift up your hands and rejoice.’

Leeta Tang clambers onto the basalt beside her, and whispers to Keeler as she continues to speak.

‘Make ready, Euphrati,’ she says. ‘It doesn’t matter what you say, whatever phatic nonsense you like. Just talk about nothing, if you want. Memories of the future, you know? All that? It doesn’t matter what at this point, just keep talking and keep them focused. Bring them together, and keep them there.’

Keeler nods, understanding, without looking at Tang. She keeps talking.

‘Even in the valley of night, in caverns measureless to man, in this great hour of calamity, we walk with Him, in defiance of death. We are souls bound together. One species joined against the darkness. We are together as one, or we are nothing. The Emperor must live.’

‘The Emperor must live,’ murmurs Leeta Tang at her side, echoing the words as Keeler says them. ‘Speak this with me, as it is spoken to me. The Emperor must live.’

Cypher and his two Librarians exit the Tertiary Portal into the squalling blood rain. They have drawn their weapons, and their minds are synchronised and ready.

Horror awaits them. The behemoth Priest of Death is almost upon them, his scythe washed with gore, his bonemeal path littered with the dead in his wake. To his left and right, his retinue of champions, howling charnel beasts, drive back those

who attempt to delay him. Cypher sees Corswain, Tragan, Sigismund and Adophel, and any of the First who can still stand and hold a weapon, pitched against the keening atrocities of the Death Guard, caught up in thickets of mayhem, locked in individual death-fights, striving in vain to cut a path to Typhus and seize a chance to strike at him.

The bone-song is deafening.

Cypher's pistol discharges, cutting down the first of the Death Guard that rush at him. As Cypher, he should have been here all along, a figurehead warrior fighting the foe at the front line of battle. But as Zahariel the Librarian, his obligation has been to mediate from afar and grapple with the metaphysical scope of the war.

Now, at last, he can do both. For a few seconds at least.

+Begin!+ he sends as they stride forward to meet death face to face.

The minds of the three psykers lock together, and spear out in one equal temper.

10:xiv

The magician’s tricks

He finally reaches his father again. Horus looks up from his work.

‘Garviel,’ he says. His voice is stone grating against stone. ‘I had hoped to keep you out of this. I do not want you here.’

The Lupercal Court is silent, a still midnight of gleaming tiles and black bone pillars. There is no one else here. Loken’s footsteps echo as he walks across the vast space to join his father, and his father’s prey.

‘There is nowhere else I should be, but at my father’s side,’ he replies.

Horus stops dragging the Emperor’s bloody body towards the remaining thrones. He lets it slump. He rises, glaring at his son.

‘At my side? At my *side*, Garviel?’ he says. ‘I think you forget the side you took in this.’

‘I stayed on the same side all along,’ says Loken. ‘It was you who forgot.’

The Warmaster snorts, amused by the impudence. He glances down at his father’s wretched body. The dust of the shattered throne still covers it, black where it has caked the dried blood.

‘You always spoke your mind, Loken,’ Horus muses. ‘That is why I liked you. Well, whether you stayed on your side or picked a new one, it was the *wrong* one. The cause you champion is done. Look. See? It’s over.’

‘I see all too well what you have done, my Lupercal,’ Loken replies.

Horus looks at him sharply.

‘You understand He’s used you, Loken? You understand that? He’s used you all along, true to form.’

‘I was always His to be used,’ says Loken.

‘You were mine!’ Horus snaps. He rises to his full height, a colossus of shadow. ‘My *son*! He brought you here as a weapon. A blade to prise open my heart. To *wound* me.’

Loken takes a careful step backwards, his sword low at his side. It is taking every measure of his resolve just to face this creature.

‘From your anger, father, it seems that weapon was well judged,’ he replies. ‘I do not understand the Emperor’s choices or His plans, but if that is why He brought me with Him, then it was effective. You speak as though you are hurt, which tells me you have a heart to open still. It tells me you still feel as a man feels.’

‘Of course! I am a man still!’

‘Are you? Forgive me, but that’s not what I see.’

‘What do you see?’ Horus snarls.

‘Something that is too terrible to behold.’

‘Yet you stand there and behold me well enough, Loken.’

‘I’ve seen too much already, father,’ says Loken sadly. ‘I cannot look away. But if you have a heart still, look to it now. See what you have become for yourself. Please, before it’s too late.’

‘What I am is my choice, Garviel,’ Horus rumbles.

‘I don’t think it was.’

‘Don’t goad me! I have no wish to kill you.’

‘I know,’ says Loken. ‘If you had, I would be dead long since. That gives me hope too.’

‘Hope in what?’

Loken shrugs.

‘That the Lupercal I loved is still in there,’ he replies. ‘Somewhere. We fought together, father. Side by side. Fight at my side now. Fight this power that controls you. See what it has done to you, and how it has poisoned your mind. Cast it out, and stand with me. Show the selfless loyalty for which you were famed.’

‘Loyalty?’ Horus scoffs.

‘Your loyalty was why you were named Warmaster,’ says Loken. ‘There was no one better for that honour. That’s precisely why the powers of Chaos turned their will upon you. If the Emperor made me a weapon against you, the gods of Chaos used you in the same way against Him.’

Horus is silent for a moment.

‘I *will* kill you, Loken,’ he says quietly. He rolls *Worldbreaker* slowly in his palm. ‘I will do it without hesitation if you do not cease with this provocation. I would rather you lived.’

‘And I would rather live,’ answers Loken. ‘But I am of the Legiones Astartes, born for war. I never thought I’d live this long.’

Horus pauses, then nods ruefully.

‘Nor I,’ he replies. ‘The warrior’s lot. We were made to do so much and expect so little. Bright glory, not long lives.’

He manages a sad smile.

‘But look at us both, Loken,’ he says. ‘Those of us that live can achieve so much. I am not a monster. I swear to you. Every man who has fought against me in this war, I have offered amnesty and forgiveness if they repent and come to my side. That is more mercy than my father would have shown in the same position. My dear brother Sanguinius, my father… you. I have forgiveness for all, if they ask it of me.’

‘And if they don’t? Sanguinius… Your father…?’

‘They… were stubborn. Foolish. Deluded. But you, my son, if you are as enlightened as you claim, you are not so beguiled

by the Imperial lie. Be my son again. Accept the Empyreal Truth of this new age. Sheathe that useless sword and go wait in the cloisters. Sit, watch, wait and learn as I conclude this necessary business. Then greet the dawn with me. Later, we will sit and talk as we did of old. I will tell you my dreams, my plans, and make you part of them.'

'Father, if you persist, there will be no later.'

Horus growls softly.

'You *do* think I'm a monster, then? Loken, from a distance the grace of a god seems callous and brutal because it is operating at such a mighty scale. There is perfection in what I do, a plan–'

'Was not the same true of the Master of Mankind?' Loken asks.

'Of course not!' Horus scoffs. 'Oh, it seemed so for many years. I believed it. I believed He had a perfect plan because I believed He was so mighty. What parts I did not understand, I accepted as a mystery too complex for my mind to understand. But look at Him.'

He glares down at the motionless body.

'There was no plan, Loken,' Horus says. 'Just a rash assembly of hasty ideas and frantic remedies as things fell apart around Him. Look at the way He came to fight me! He had lost before He even began. His power was nothing compared to mine, and He didn't even grasp that. He couldn't win, but He came to face me. Oh, He fought admirably, in the circumstances. But it was all just desperate tricks and reckless gambits. Impressive, dramatic, but empty, and with no deeper value. So many times I put Him down. So *many* times, and spared Him too. And He just dredged some last tattered morsel of strength and came back at me. It was messy, pathetic, embarrassing. And in it, I saw that's what His whole life has been. One cheap trick after another, one scrappy sleight of hand and then the next, patching over the cracks as they appear, trying not to let anyone see that it was all improvised.

Garviel, He convinced us all that He knew what He was doing, but it was just for show. An aspect. Just another aspect. There was never a plan. We followed Him, and trusted Him, but He had no idea where He was going or how to get there.'

'He couldn't win, but He came to face you,' says Loken. 'That's what you just said. Does not that suggest courage in His convictions?'

'Courage?' There is scorn in the Warmaster's stone-scraping-stone voice.

'Is that not how you always fought?'

'Loken–'

'It was. I was there. And I can't win either, but I came to face you. What does that tell you?'

'That the world is full of fools,' Horus says. 'Loken, I worshipped this man. I trusted Him. I thought He was a great magician. But His truths were all lies, and His tricks were just tricks!'

'Isn't that true of all magicians?' asks Loken. 'The art is to make it look easy while you attempt the impossible. You put on a show that dazzles and captivates, but behind the scenes, it is all messy, makeshift and frantic. That was always His truth, He just hid it well, for a magician should never reveal his tricks. To be Emperor, He had to convince us. To be Emperor, He had to shield us from the ugly, stopgap truth of His work. He had to spare us from the constant, ongoing horror of His struggle. We had to believe in Him. To be the Master of Mankind, father, His life had to be one long and ceaseless hidden battle, by any and every means He could find, to stop doom from overtaking us.'

'It's not your father's power, it's what He does with it…' Horus murmurs.

'What?'

'Nothing,' says Horus. 'You believe this then of Him?'

‘I do. He was our shield, from danger, and from truths not meant for us. The moment we discovered that, it made Him weaker.’

‘No. You’re wrong.’

‘I know I am not,’ says Loken. ‘He fought His whole life, frantically, hour after hour, to stop one thing.’

‘And what would that be?’

‘Becoming you.’

Horus turns to stare at Loken. In his new dark aspect, his eyes have become the mirror of the emblem on his breastplate, baleful and bloodlit, with vertically aligned slit pupils.

‘You… dare…?’ he whispers.

‘Chaos will spare no one,’ says Loken. ‘Chaos cares not. You are a puppet of its whim. It has beguiled you simply to perform one deed. To remove the one man it feared. Yes, the Emperor stole fire from Chaos, and used its power against it, but He always knew that He could not take it whole, for it would consume Him. You mocked Him for lacking the courage to do what you have done, but it wasn’t a lack of courage. It was an act of supreme will. You have embraced Chaos whole, and thus given it exactly what it wanted. You have no power of your own. You think you do, but it’s just an illusion. He opposed Chaos at every turn, and rejected every lie and promise it threw at Him, so His life, like His fight with you, was a scrappy, messy brawl of improvisation and persistence. You have accepted them all, which is why your path seems so strong and clear.’

‘It is, you ungrateful fool!’

‘Then show me,’ Loken cries. ‘Show it to me! Tell me what it is!’

‘I have nothing to prove to you!’

‘Not to me, to yourself!’ Loken says. ‘*Make no mistake!* That is what you told me years ago! *Make no mistake!* Well, father,

see your own mistake for what it is! Your path is a grim darkness where there is only war and no place for mankind!'

'There *is* no mistake!' Horus says. 'Look at me, Loken! See what I am!' he cries, and claps his hand against his chest. 'I am made mighty beyond all measure by the warp! I am transfigured and ascendant! I am a god, boy, a mighty god, and gods do not make mistakes!'

'We are mighty because we are right,' Loken replies. 'We are not right because we are mighty. Vile the hour when that reversal becomes our credo.'

'What nonsense is that?' asks Horus. 'It sounds like another of His lies!'

'It was something Sindermann taught me–'

'That old fool? He knew nothing!'

'Not the true facts of the matter, perhaps, because none of us did back then. But his wisdom was flawless anyway. You are not a god. They're just letting you think you are. If you are so mighty, my father, where is your wisdom? Why are you so blind, unless lies have blinded you?'

'They would not lie to me. They would not.'

Loken sighs. He turns from his glowering gene-sire and stares down at the crushed and mutilated body of the Emperor.

'You were right,' he says. 'Their grip on him is too great. He will not turn back, and he cannot be saved.'

Horus steps forward.

'What are you doing? You speak to Him as though He had sense and life left to answer?'

Loken looks at him over his shoulder. Those cold grey eyes. That look reserved only for his enemies.

'He does,' he says.

10:xv

The Lantern

And then there is a blink.

It is small, so very small. A flash of psykanic energy that is dwarfed by the raging maelstrom of warpflux that drowns Terra and the Solar Realm, like a single spark in a seething field of lava, or a single drop of spray in a heaving ocean, or a single molecule in the biomass of a living organism. It is nothing, it is inconsequential, it is insignificant.

It is also brief. It lasts barely eight seconds, and those seconds are fleeting and meaningless because of the cessation of time. The eight seconds start when Zahariel El'Zurias speaks the word 'begin', and they end when the hissing scythe of Typhus cleaves Tanderion in half, severs both of Asradael's legs, and spins Zahariel to the ground with his torso sliced open, thus breaking the psychic coordination of the three Librarians.

But for eight seconds, the blink is a pure flash of psychic power burning a tiny hole in the immaterial vortex and breaking the Chaotic harmony of Typhus' bone-song.

The song resumes the moment the blink is over, and the howling warp instantly fills in the hole it made.

But, for those eight seconds, the bone-song is silenced.

In the geophonic chambers of the mountain, Euphrati Keeler feels the blink. The bedrock around her, the walls, the high ceilings, even the block she is standing on, all seem to soften as the throttling chokehold of the bone-song is briefly suspended. No longer constricted, the mountain flexes, like a muscle un-tensing from rigidity, or a throat opening to breathe again. A sudden cool wind moans through the chambers, released from the compression of magic. It flaps the ragged clothes and dirty hair of the vast congregation, and some cry

out in fear, but most keep speaking, chorusing the words that Keeler intones. Her mouth is cracked dry and there's blood in her throat, but she does not stop.

'Speak this with me, as it is spoken to me. The Emperor must live.'

The mountain exhales. It gasps, unstrangled. It inhales.

It speaks. It speaks their words.

It speaks them as light.

The light wells up. It seeps from the shaped stone of the walls, a flickering pattern of sparks and flashes at first, then a striation of lines that outline the flaws and marbling of the walls like neon, then a soft white glow that builds and builds until every rock surface and plane is radiating an inner light like a lumen globe.

And then it is brighter, and brighter still. Shadows vanish. Outlines blur. It is too bright to see.

Darkness dies, dismembered by the murderous light.

The wind is in her face. The light is in her eyes. She hears people crying out, but it is impossible to tell if it is in terror or wonder. She is floating. Others are starting to float too, lifting a few feet into the air, suspended by the sonorous light. Some of the pilgrims begin to shake as they rise, shedding dust like dry paper or white petal blossom, like dolls made of ash.

She can see through the mountain. So can Cartheus. So can the blind Zhi-Meng. All of them. Millions of them. They can see through the skin of the rock, through the translucent membrane on which pasts and futures have been traced. They can see the priests and the magicians, the seers and the holy fools, the mad and the blessed, other pilgrims from other ages, the seekers of truth, the outcasts, the novitiates, everyone who has ever come to this place, who has ever been drawn here, who has ever had the imagination to accept the insight of the living rock. There are generations of them, a hundred generations, a thousand, gazing out through the surface of the rock, ranks of silent shadows that stretch back to the most

distant parts of history. They can see the painted shamans, the inquisitive hunters with their spears and offerings and beakers of dye, and behind them, other figures, more wary and enthralled, curious and scared, figures that are not quite human, but one day will be. A bloodline, a legacy receding by century and generation, as far back as the genetic code will stretch.

'Speak this with me, as it is spoken to me. The Emperor must live.'

Keeler sees Wereft, rising, howling, dissolving into paper ribbons in the light. Others too, ascending slowly in graceful horror and macabre wonder, becoming sparks and cell-dust and billows of ghastly radiance. But they are not gone. To be absent in the body is to be present in the light.

She hears Leeta Tang screaming as she rises up. She looks at Keeler, eyes wide and burning, and then she too is nothing but stars and ashes whirled by the wind.

The Hollow Mountain shivers. Impacted snow slumps from its shrugging shoulders, millions of tonnes collapsing into its craggy skirts, lifting a cloud of ice crystals like white fog. The engulfing storm, black as pitch-blend, blows back from the peak in a rolling ripple two hundred kilometres wide, inky cloud folding into and under itself in a vast expanding halo. Pearlescent lightning shears and rakes the emptying sky.

Light spears from the mountain's portals, blue-white and fierce, melting snow and ice and annihilating the shadows. The bone-song of the Death Guard has resumed with renewed fury, but it cannot compete. The Archaen blight, born of the most ancient organic corruptors, paleovirologies, primordial interstellar bacterial colonies, and the primal essence of decay that existed long before anything died on Terra, is baked from the black cliffs and scoured off the burning platforms, sterilised and purged. Dead viral matter falls as stringy black rain, and torrents of fallen insect husks drool from the cliffs like drained pus. Black figures, in their thousands, some burst and evacuated, collapse screaming into the pass, carried by the

crushing avalanche of light, or swept away by the continental downfall of dislodged snow and compacted ice. There is a mangling roar of engulfing destruction.

Part of that roar is Typhus' scream, his song disarticulated and crushed into noise.

The mountain's defenders, Corswain and his Dark Angels, Sigismund and the last of his Seconds, are caught in the catastrophic upheaval alongside their adversaries. Many are swept away instantly, tumbling into the grinding mayhem with the stricken warriors of the XIV Legion, mashed by sliding ice, shredded by the wind, burned by the light, or drowned by the deluge of dead biomatter that pours like sacred naft or dirty oil. Cliffs collapse and fall away, rocks topple, fighting platforms disintegrate as the light scrapes everything from the mountain's flanks.

A few hold on, by luck or sheer fury, clinging to cracked rock, or tangled debris, or simply each other. With bloody hands and torn fingers, they refuse to let go, despite the screaming light that breaks their bones or the blizzarding force that cracks their war plate and crushes their lungs.

Where once stood Hasgard Gate, Zephon Sorrow-Bringer thinks for a moment that one of his serpenta pistols has misfired. He is about to cast them aside, fearing an overheat implosion, for both volkite weapons have been monstrously overtaxed.

But neither one of them is the source of the flash. Light shears through the swirling murk, so fierce it stings his eyes.

'Fafnir!' he yells. Rann has fallen again. He is a few metres away, pinned against a blood-soaked scrap of bunker wall. He is struggling to free his axes and himself from the dead weight of the World Eater that crumpled onto him when he slew it. Zephon goes to him, and heaves the corpse aside.

He hauls Rann upright.

'Do you see it?' Zephon shouts. His mouth is wet with blood.

Rann nods. It is hard not to. Shadows are lengthening all around them, becoming stark and hard. The lurid red glare that has bathed them all since the slaughter began is giving way, washed out by a brighter radiance. Even the traitors, massing from all sides as they pursue the pair, have paused and turned to look.

Through the blowing smoke and the swirling ash, far away, on what was once, perhaps, the horizon, there is a column of light. It is breaking, like sunrise, across the endless desolation, banishing the darkness. Its white fire is immense and dazzling. In another second, it has become so bright that it bleaches out everything. Nothing is hidden. The fire reflects off the liquid mud like sunlight off glass. It illuminates the true horror of the world, the extraordinary carpet of tangled armoured bodies, the heaped corpses, the dead engines and cremated tank hulls, the dead piled in cliffs and mounds, like the dunes of a desert or the waves of a frozen sea.

'What is it?' Rann murmurs.

Zephon shakes his head. He tries to pull his brother away. The sudden dawn has halted the enemy in confusion. They have a chance to break clear, to reposition.

Rann resists. The light is meaningless, anonymous, perhaps merely the blast-flash of some monumental detonation. But he cannot look away. It is meaningless, but it somehow means everything.

'I…' he begins. 'Where is it?'

Again, the Dominion shakes his head. It is pointless to speculate, for no directions have survived the war. They are all long lost, along with any sense of them.

But he hesitates. Like Fafnir Rann, he feels meaning inherent in that pillar of flame, as though, beyond hope, some direction has miraculously been restored.

One, at least.

'North,' he says. 'That's north.'

The pillar of fire begins to fade, its light dying back. The red gloom starts to descend once more.

‘No,’ cries Rann bitterly.

And then there is a blink, and the light returns a thousandfold.

‘Quiet!’ yells Sandrine Icaro, and the Hegemon’s grand Rotunda falls silent. She rises to her feet, staring. Others get up from their workstations, Sidozie, Gaston, Ilya Ravallion. They are all staring too.

Light, thin but piercingly bright, is spearing into the Rotunda around the edges of the blast shutters that seal the window ports. Wisping smoke catches in the slender shafts and rays.

Someone starts to cry.

‘What is that?’ asks Ilya.

‘Sensoria!’ Sidozie commands, turning to the War Court officers around him. ‘Source and origin! Analysis!’

Some turn to their consoles, fumbling, uncertain.

‘Open the shutters,’ says Sandrine Icaro.

‘Mistress Tacticae, we–’

‘Open the damn shutters,’ she says.

Far above Terra, the traitor fleet hangs in awful silence, a shoal of warships forty thousand strong, their hulls gleaming in the clotting light of a dying, half-eaten sun. They hang in a medium of immaterial discharge, for there is no space in the Solar Realm, no open void, just the fluid miasma of warpflux.

Below them, the curve of Terra, the Throneworld, a toxic and intoxicated hemisphere of filth and corruption. The surface is invisible, obscured by the banked layers of cloud, smoke and pollutants that congest the tortured atmosphere. Brown smoke-plumes the size of nations swirl and coagulate, occasionally underlit by the flash of detonations, of orbital battery fire, and the empyric lightning of the neverness storm that flays the world’s surface with lashes a thousand kilometres long. The smothering cloud is so noxious and dense, Terra now

resembles a torrid gas giant, or, perhaps, a fog-shrouded tomb, for when the smoke is washed away there will be nothing left except a dead cinder. It is hard to discern where the smog-asphyxiated sphere ends and the neverness miasma begins.

There is a blink. A flash of scintillation one hundred kilometres down through the strangulating smoke cover. A dull flash under the cloud. It dies away. Then another comes, like sheet lightning, then a third. With each one, a profound psychoacoustic thump that screeches the sensoria of the traitor ships. The thumps are muffled, buried, like seismic quakes. Static begins to growl and seethe. Infrasonics throb. Vox-systems start to squeal and bray like livestock in the chutes of a slaughterhouse.

Another flash. This one does not die back. It grows. It swells. It burns up through the toxic smoke like a force-blade cutting through a cloak. In raw fury, it bursts through the atmospheric occlusion, and spears into super-orbital space, a thin ray of undiluted white light that shoots out from Terra in a continuous jet.

It is a slender shaft of light, barely five kilometres wide, but it does not end. It scores out from Terra into the false night of the Solar Realm like the beam of a searchlight. It is impossibly bright. Six traitor ships, caught in its path, are vaporised instantly. A dozen others, orbit-anchored within range of its radiation sleeve, are spared instant incineration but lurch out of formation as it kills their power systems and fries their circuits.

The Astronomican is relit.

Eighty light minutes from Terra, hidden in the cloak of Saturn's rings, the remains of Battlefleet Solar stirs from silent running. The *Phalanx*, its flagship, ignites its drives.

'Admiral,' says Halbract, 'there is no determining the true meaning of this.'

The Huscarl is still speaking in a whisper. When Niora Su-Kassen replies, she does so in a normal speaking voice,

finding that unfamiliar register for the first time in months.

‘It doesn’t matter, my honoured friend,’ she says. ‘You and I can both see what it is.’

Halbract nods cautiously. The sensor displays clearly show the magnitude of the photonic signal they have just registered.

‘Without doubt,’ he agrees, still whispering. ‘But we do not know what it signifies. We cannot commit the fleet without verification of–’

‘Oh, we *can*, Halbract,’ Su-Kassen replies. ‘We most certainly can.’

She takes her seat in the command throne of the bridge. Around her, as per her instruction, the ship’s systems are waking from low-power and hibernation modes.

‘The Astronomican is lit,’ she says. ‘We are signalled.’

‘But–’

‘Your caution is, as ever, admirable, my lord,’ she says, ‘but verification is beside the point. It may be a signal of victory on Terra, in which case we are urgently needed. Or it may be the summons we have been dreading, to pluck our lord the Emperor from an unwinnable position and convey Him clear of the enemy’s grasp, in which case, the urgency is greater yet. Either way, we are called. I am committing the fleet. We are going in. No more waiting, no more games.’

‘And if the beacon has been lit by a victorious Warmaster to signify his usurpation and triumph?’ Halbract asks.

She shrugs, and smiles a thin smile.

‘Then why the hell are we hiding here?’ she asks. ‘If we’re going to die, let’s do it well.’

Halbract steps back, raises his fist to his chest, and salutes her. He turns to the bridge.

‘War stations!’ he bellows. ‘War stations! Make ready! Make ready for active engagement! Raise the shields and bring all batteries to power!’

Su-Kassen sits back, and pulls down the armature of the gilded vox-mic.

‘This is Su-Kassen,’ she says. ‘This is the *Phalanx*. All fleet elements, form on me and begin acceleration to advance. War stations! Make ready to engage. Assault pattern is Dominus Alpha-Two-Two. Time on target, seventy-four minutes. Captains, expect hard resistance on final approach and at destination. Dominus Alpha-Two-Two is our pattern, but I hereby grant discretionary judgement when we enter the battle sphere actual. This will be an evolving situation. Best judgement. Improvise, if you have to. Just give those bastards hell, and tell them I sent you.’

She pushes the mic aside.

‘In the name of Terra and the Emperor!’ she shouts across the bridge. ‘Main drive! Advance!’

Aeonid Thiel takes the signal wafer from the Mistress of Sensoria. Her face is pale, and she can’t find any words. He nods, and takes the wafer directly to Guilliman at the strategium.

His primarch glances at him as he presents the wafer.

‘The Astronomican,’ Thiel says simply.

Guilliman doesn’t even look at the wafer.

‘Then now we can see where we’re going,’ he says, ‘as he will see us as we kill him. Main power, shipmaster. Ready war stations. Advance, battle formation. As we are illuminated, so we will illuminate. If my father still lives, he cannot fight alone.’

You see the light at the windows of your Court, so very bright despite the black and coloured glassaic. Another of your father’s plans, another counter-strike, another desperate effort. How many plans did He make, how many gambits did He set in motion, all running together in the hope that one might succeed?

This one is modestly effective. It will hurt you, an aggravating setback. This will draw in the others, the remnants of His supporters, the ones that you have held at bay. This will bring Roboute, the Lion and Russ, like the loyal lapdogs they are, to absolve themselves for being absent, and to claim some measure of vengeance. The war on two fronts that you have avoided this long has finally caught you.

But, no matter. It won't be a war on two fronts really. Terra is done, and though Loken speaks to Him as if He is still alive and capable, your father is done too. Look at Him there, half-dead, on the deck.

Beside His dusty body there's a tarot card, lying where it fell. *The Lantern*. Most amusing. All those little schemes. Is that why your father fought you so long and so fruitlessly, at such cost to Himself, to buy time for this? Such a waste, if so. A foolish ploy. When Roboute arrives, the light will show him nothing but your father's corpse and the magnitude of your power. He will probably flee at the very sight of you. He comes expecting a wayward brother. He will find a god instead.

That revelation will break him, and even if it doesn't, you will quickly scatter his indignant fleet. And you will offer him terms of course, just as you have offered terms to them all. It will be interesting to see what Guilliman says in response. For all his regal bearing, Roboute is a pragmatist. He will instantly recognise that which he cannot fight. Perhaps he will finally know fear. You imagine he will make accommodation, and submit to you. More thrones can always be built. Though you worry that those knees of his do not bend.

The Lion and Russ, well… You'll have to kill them both, without compunction. Corax too. None of them have Roboute's political guile. Too much of the warrior in them all.

Still, *Worldbreaker* is ready for each one of them, and your altar awaits their skulls. Your Talon is whetted.

Speaking of which… You turn to your father. It grieves you, but time's up, and you are tired of offering reprieves. He has

spurned every one, pulling out trick after trick.

Loken tries to stop you. You push him aside. Your poor son is deluded, and his loyalty is wounding. He calls to your father as though He can still hear and react. He speaks to Him as though there is still one last, clever trick to play.

There was. It was the Astronomican. A decent ruse, but nothing like sufficient.

You swing *Worldbreaker* down and crush your father's skull.

The faithful make their sacrifice in the Hollow Mountain.

10:xvi

The mourning of the last day

Loken tries to stop his father, but *nothing* can stop his father. Nothing can stop the monstrous, bloodlit personification of Chaos, so wretchedly bloated with power, so hideously sure of itself. Horus doesn't even need to touch him. Loken, sword raised, is swept out of his path by the crackling field of immaterial energies that surrounds his father's bloodlit form. The stinging aura brushes Loken aside, as a wind might lift and scatter motes of dust, and sends him rolling and clattering across the oil-dark deck.

He rises to his knees, numb and concussed, and yells his father's name, but to no avail, for his voice is drowned out by the rushing whispers that fill the air of the Court.

So he can only watch, his eyes wide with tears, as Horus Lupercal commits his final blasphemy and slays the Emperor.

There's no joy in it. No sense of victory. Not even the contentment of closure, of a battle squarely won, and a compliance achieved. To kill a helpless man, to crush His head into the deck with your maul when He can't even stand or open His eyes… What does that say about you? Some warrior. Some Warmaster.

The infinite legions of the Neverborn are delighted, at least. They are whispering. Whispering to each other. The rapturous hush and lisp of their voices is building around you, filling the Court, beginning to drown out even the dry-wood crackle of the burning warp. What is it they are saying?

'Stop your whispers,' you tell them. You have no time for their jubilation.

You need a moment to contemplate. Can't they see that? You need a moment to reconcile, to centre yourself. Look at what

you've done. Gods can do anything, and they do not make mistakes, but look at what you've done. You lever *Worldbreaker*'s spiked head out of the deck. Blood and years drip from it. There isn't even a skull left to place in reverence on your chapel's altar. Your maul crushed His head entirely and gouged a deep crater in the deck beneath. There's nothing but a mess of blood and pulped flesh, fragments of splintered bone, matted hair, a dislodged, staring eye–

Steel yourself. To be Warmaster… It's not about glory and prestige, it's about possessing the strength to see things through to the end, even when that end is regrettable and unpalatable. War demands it, and only the strongest have the stomach to finish what they started.

You are the strongest. War is ultimately a bloody, tragic business, and only the strongest have the wisdom to understand that once they unleash it, they must be prepared to accept the cost.

He was just a man, and now He's dead. Forget that. Forget the mutilated horror at your feet. Remember what He was. Remember what you were fighting. The tyrant. The King-of-Ages. The liar. The ruthless master who enslaved a species and used you all. The betrayer. The schemer who wove His damned and secret plans for thirty thousand years without a second thought for the lives and blood that would be spent to achieve them.

Yes, think of that. Content yourself with *that*. Let those thoughts be your consolation. Think of His crimes and His atrocities. Remember that He, and He alone, knew that suffering created lethal and unstable horrors on the other plane of reality, yet saw fit to breed a generation of transhuman warriors like you to subjugate the stars. And when Chaos became a focused, existential threat, He seemed dismayed by the bloodlit consequences of His actions.

You should have turned against Him sooner. You and all your brothers, for all of them had wit and sense. You should have rallied them earlier, long before Ullanor, long before the

crusade began to soak the stars in blood. A band of brothers, all of them masters of war, born to understand the properties of conflict… You could have stood together, demanded His capitulation with one voice, removed Him from power, and prevented this, *all* of it, before–

And if He had refused, then you could have stopped Him. Together. Stopped Him cleanly, before the price became a trillion lives. A quick end. A clean death. But they were all too much like Him, each one of them a copied part of Him. Rogal too stubborn to listen, Sanguinius too forgiving to see the flaws, Russ too enflamed with his own ego…

Throne, *all of them!* All of them too much like Him, even the ones that eventually sided with you when the blood began to flow. Fulgrim too in love with his own glory, Angron too agonised to know any different, Magnus… Magnus too headstrong and sure of himself.

All of them, all of them, *all of them*… Too much like Him, because that was how He made them. Too much like their father.

Your father.

But not you. You were the only one who overcame the inheritance of your bloodline. You remained true. You alone stayed strong. You have saved the human race, or what remains of it. Remember that. You had to mash the skull of your helpless father into the floor to do it, but ugly deeds are the price you pay when the cause is just.

Your own father.

You try not to dwell on that part. You try not to think of Him that way. You try to forget the bond you once had, the thirty glorious years, or how proud you felt to be His first-found son…

It's finished now. You take the time you need to collect yourself. You'll decide how long that will be. A period of mourning. A time for reflection. You just need some peace now. A long measure of peace. Some silence.

But the whispers. The whispers are deafening.

‘Stop,’ you murmur. Why won’t they leave you alone? They have been whispering, incessantly, behind your back, since Maloghurst first woke you from your dream to begin the final illumination.

No, not Maloghurst. Argonis. That’s right. The boy, Kinor Argonis. Oh, it’s so hard to think with the whispers gnawing at your brain. You want to settle your mind, and get all of this clear and straight, so that when you dictate it to Mersadie Oliton, she records a true account of it, and history will remember how hard you tried, and how deeply you struggled with your conscience, and how heavy was the price you paid. But the whispers…

‘Leave me alone,’ you say.

The walls breathe. It is very bright in the Court, like being outdoors in the searing starlight of Calastar, or the labyrinth-knot of Uigebealach in the blazing warp. Light, almost maddeningly bright, strobes slightly, flickering through leaves swayed by the wind. Or something like leaves. You don’t care. You don’t look.

You hear a man weeping nearby, somewhere behind you. That, unlike the whispering, you can forgive. You understand Loken’s grief, for it is your own.

You don’t look around. You can’t take your eyes off your father.

‘Help me,’ you say, over your shoulder. ‘Garviel… Help me with Him. Help me bear Him up.’

You hear him rise to his feet behind you. You kneel, and lift your father’s body in your arms. What whole part of it is left, at least. He is so light, so fragile, there is nothing of Him. Like rags, like a bundle of sticks, dry and paper-thin–

‘Please, Lupercal, stop now,’ Loken says.

‘It’s too late,’ you reply. You clear your throat. ‘I have stopped, Garviel. It’s done. It’s finished.’

‘It’s not too late,’ he answers.

You turn to look at him, your father in your arms. Loken gazes up at you, his eyes dark hollows, his sword forgotten on the deck behind him.

‘Help me with Him,’ you say. ‘Help me lay Him to rest in honour. He was my father, after all.’

‘It’s not too late,’ Loken insists. ‘Not for you. Not for us. You’ve done what you set out to do. Let go of the power.’

‘Why would I want to do that?’ you ask.

‘To prove you are Horus. To prove you are a man and not a puppet.’

‘I told you–’

‘You did. But their claws are deep in you, and their lies delude you. Prove them wrong. You say you took the power into yourself to achieve this end. Well, it is achieved, father. So if you meant what you said, you don’t need the power any more. Set it aside while you still can. Show the world of men that you are still one of them, and true to your word. Show the foul gods you are not their plaything, or a helpless instrument of their designs.’

‘The power is mine,’ you say. The boy has no understanding of anything. ‘The power is mine to keep and use as I see fit. It’s not the power, Loken, it’s what you do with it. It is not the evil you think it is.’

‘You have just slain a golden king in a cathedral of darkness,’ says Loken. ‘Did those aspects, light and dark, choose themselves?’

‘They are just aspects!’ you laugh. ‘Contrivances of presentation. Darkness to oppose light. You see? I chose my aspect to counter His arrogant show of glory. The darkness isn’t evil, Loken, no more than the light is good or true. They are just symbols–’

‘Symbols have power, father–’

‘Not in the simplistic way you think, my son.’

‘Then cast them off,’ says Loken. ‘Get rid of them, this darkness, this black heart, this palace of terror. Cast the power away now you are done with it. Use the one thing you had that your father did not.’

‘And that is what?’ you enquire.

Loken places his hand on his chest.

‘A feeling heart,’ he says bitterly. ‘You just killed your father. Be a man and show you are sensible to it.’

His words cut you. Does he really think this of you? Can’t he see? Perhaps…

Perhaps there is some truth in what he says. Perhaps you should shed this black aspect of terror, to show that it is yours to command, and not the other way around? The work is over. It would be a relief. It would take this weight from your limbs, and the guilt from your heart, and this deadness from your mind. You could breathe again, and hurt, and grieve for what has been done, and clothe yourself in white and gold for mourning. It would make the pain go away. It would justify your actions.

The future can see you. You dare not imagine a future that only knows you as this.

You let it go.

Just for a moment, you let it go.

Just for a second.

You let it slip from you, like a falling cloak. You let it slide out of you like a withdrawing knife, its thorns raking your meat and marrow as it drags away. You let it drain from you, and pour out of you, like blood. There’s so much of it, but everything stops bleeding eventually.

The whispers rise again, in horror. They shriek at you.

‘Stop it,’ you say. ‘I answer to no one.’

But the whispers won't cease. They swirl around you, saying the thing they have been saying since this all began, again and again, like dead leaves skittering in the breeze or shushing under foot. Like the dry wing-cases of beetles. Like whirring moths. Like the fire-spit of the warp, unending–

What *is* it that they keep whispering? It's infuriating. You can almost make out the words.

The name.

One name… No, one phrase, uttered and repeated, echoed and amplified by psychoacoustic force. One phrase, made of white light, uttered in unison by a million voices. Two million. An entire species.

The Emperor must live.

No. That's not–

Speak this with me, as it is spoken to me. The Emperor must live.

No!

Lift up your hands. He must live.

A trick. A last trick. A last *damned* trick! A lever to prise open your armour. A feint to make you drop your guard. A magician's encore sleight of hand. The final desperate scheme of an eternal and ruthless schemer.

You make to cast your father's corpse aside, because you understand it is merely part of the trick, but the body is already disintegrating into papery ash and luminous dust. It was just an aspect, another discarded aspect, another empty husk.

He is not dead.

You cry out, in anger and despair. You try to snatch the power back into yourself, but it is pooled around you in a great black slick, sticky and sluggish, slow to respond, slow to obey, reluctant to reinhabit the vessel of your body now that you have scorned it. You draw it back in as quickly as you can.

You inhale to fill your lungs and soul with it. You gather it in frantically, for you must be ready to defend yourself.

The worst of it… Your human heart, still raw and exposed, feels relief. A kind of joy. Your father is not dead. *Your father is not dead.* You *didn't* kill Him. He *lives–*

Loken faces you, His sword is in his hand. But it's not Loken. It never was. Loken is still sprawled on the deck to your left where you threw him, gazing on in horror.

Or is it wonder?

You will not die like this. You will *not* be tricked like this. The power begins to flood back into your veins. The darkness of it. The sweet agony. The reassuring rage. The strength–

Loken steps towards you. The other Loken. The Loken who is not Loken. The sword in his hand is not Rubio's old blade. The sword in His hand is the great war-sword. The face is not Loken's. It is His face. The aspect of Loken collapses into voidmist as your father steps out to meet you in all His bloody majesty.

His wounds are great. Blood is dried black across His face and His ruined arm. But there is a light inside Him, a light behind His eyes, the pure white light of a species that, in its madness, believes in Him beyond all reason, and trusts in Him beyond all logic, a species that imagines Him to be its shield and protector, and has such faith in that act of imagination, it is made real.

He could not fight you alone. He could not beat you alone. But by bluff and ruse and stratagem and sacrifice, He has held your attention until He no longer has to.

To be absent in the body is to be present in the Emperor. That's what the whispers are screaming. A whole species is present here, its will united in one form, not a man, not a father, but a king of all the ages.

He looks like a god. A wounded god, but a god nonetheless. It's not His power, it's where it comes from.

We are one and the same, the whispers say, *mankind and Emperor, Emperor and mankind, souls bound together. We are together as one or we are nothing.*

'You are no god!' you shout.

Then this will be a fair fight, the whispers answer.

You howl your defiance as He comes at you. He is clearly weak and wounded, but you are weak too. You have gathered up but a fraction of the power you had. You must keep Him at bay for a moment longer, hold Him back while you recover your full strength.

For in this moment, you are just Horus Lupercal.

You swing *Worldbreaker* and deflect the path of His sword. Sparks fly like comets. Your Talon rakes through armour, flesh and bone. Blood fogs the air between you. His mind burns through your nervous system, disrupting your motor control and cascading pain through your core. You block His mind, twist it sideways through thirteen dimensions and render irreparable ischemic damage. You clamp His throat with your Talon.

You crush His windpipe and sever His carotid. Blood squirts out in a hosing arc. More blood snorts and spurts from His mouth as He chokes. He batters His blade across your skull and shoulder, shredding the Serpent's Scales. You push Him away, refractors banging as they fail and collapse, and punish Him with your maul as He staggers back, clutching at His throat. You break His wrist. The warblade clatters from His hand. You crunch His ribs. You unleash bloodlight from the eye on your chestplate and torch His face. His hair burns. The flesh of His cheek melts to the bone. One eye roasts and bursts. *Worldbreaker* shatters His spine.

You feel the power returning to you. It can't come fast enough. You need all of it. You need *all* of it–

Reeling, He burns you back. A beam of light rakes from His one remaining eye. Pure force, blue-white, the focused will of

the human race, piercing your darkness as the beacon of the Hollow Mountain pierces the void.

The pain is–

The pain is–

The pain is more than a man can bear.

And you are still just a man. It's not the power, it's what you do with it. And you, fool, let it go.

You let it all *go*.

You fall to your knees, on fire within and without. His psychic beam continues to incinerate you.

Please, you ask. Please, you implore. Give it back. Give the power back to me–

Oh, they will. They will. The Old Four will let you have it all back, because it serves their interests. But they will make you suffer first, as a cautionary reprimand for spurning their generous gifts. They will make you pay for that, in fire and agony, and they will let that punishment last a while. The Emperor, their only real foe, cannot kill you, after all. For all the power He has salvaged and scraped together, for all the tricks He has played to weaken you and render you vulnerable when you were entirely *invulnerable*, for all the ways He has made you look like a fool, He cannot actually *kill* you. He does not have the means, not even Him, to kill the limitless thing you have become. The instrument of Chaos Incarnate.

Because *that's* what you are, Horus Lupercal.

That's *all* you are, Warmaster.

That is all you'll *ever* be, first-found son.

A slave to their darkness. A weapon in their hands. A puppet on their strings, beguiled by their promises and lies. An instrument, with no mind of its own, designed to shatter the shield of humanity and tip the human species into the neverness of the warp.

On your knees, caught in the torrent of your father's flame, you look up at Him. You see it now, at last, perhaps as He has always seen it. A simple truth. A secret that should have been kept, despite everything. Some truths are too dangerous to know, or too lethal to hear. That's why He kept it for thirty thousand years. Now you know it too. You see, through insurmountable pain, everything… everything that has been ruined, and everything that has been betrayed. You cannot ask Him for forgiveness. You don't dare, and you can't speak anyway. But He can see it in your eyes. You were too weak to resist them then, and you will be too weak in another moment when they relent and replenish you with their abominable gifts.

Your eyes beg Him for mercy. A son to his father.

End this. End it now, if you can. If that is even possible. End it before it is too late. If you can't do it, no one can.

The burning stops. The psychic beam abates. You sway, gasping.

Your father has a knife. An old stone thing. What is it? It's so small in His hand, so ugly. That won't do it. That won't be enough.

He seems to hesitate, reluctant.

You clench, in sudden spasm and convulsion, and cry out. The power is returning. It is flowing back into you with great rapidity, as though the Old Four are suddenly desperate to restore their gifts. What do they know? What have they seen that makes them act in such haste?

Your father looks at the knife.

+I wait for you and I forgive you.+

He drives it into your heart.

10:xvii

The stroke

Loken is on his feet. He sees the blade glint. A simple stone knife won't break that plate. Something so small surely can't–

The blade goes in. Heart-thrust, the quick mercy-stroke of a Custodian's misericordia, practical and unfussy. The two figures freeze together for a moment, the kneeling son, the standing father, joined by the knife.

And through that blade, the Emperor channels the full force of His will.

The sublime power, a psychic blast of profound magnitude, courses down the ancient blade like lightning conducting through a metal rod. The fireball-flash of its strike is brighter than all creation.

Then the light begins to die. A darkness falls quickly. It is not the glossy blackness of the Court's infinite architecture, it is soft and mute, like the advent of night or the dimming of vision and sense.

Horus smiles.

His smile is no longer the terrible smile that greeted them when they entered the Lupercal Court, the smile that shivered the world with mortal dread. It is now the smile Loken remembers from long ago.

There is no blood. The athame is sharp, sharp enough to cut space. Sharp enough to slice reality. It has waited a long, long time for this, from the original killing that made it, and stained it with the shadow of all murder, to this, the eighth death that it was promised.

Horus smiles. The smile vanishes. Then so does flesh, lips and mouth, revealing another smile, a rictus grin of teeth, a

mask of bone. There is no redemption, for the time for that is long passed. There is only resignation.

And in the end, it’s just a man killing his son with a stone.

The blade slides out and turns to dust. The body falls.

And then the galaxy burns.

10:xviii

Kairos and chronos

This is the end and the death. But it is neither the end expected nor the death foretold. Prophecy is as confounded as time, and farsight is as useless as the plans that men have made.

It is the death of Horus Lupercal. It is the end of heresy. It is the death of one man's dreams and the end of the Imperium He so carefully envisioned. It is the death of a brief golden age and the end of a promise.

It is the end of a war, yet the death of peace. From here, the long slide begins, the terminal plunge into a grim darkness where the only constant will be war, and the only truth will be pain, and the only living will be suffering, and the only end of suffering will be death itself.

War is now only ever the sequel to war. War will beget war, and so down through time, generation after generation, and so on thereafter, into a far future where war becomes its own definition, and an end unto itself, where death becomes the reason for war, and war becomes the reason for death, worlds without end.

And in that future, the Old Four will come to delight, for the quick death and sudden end they strove for here, and were denied, will be drawn out forever instead across the infinite architecture of the galaxy in one eternal act of worship to the powers they represent.

For now, though, they scream. They gnash in anguish, thwarted and outplayed; they recoil in frustration, cheated and forsaken; they flail in pain, wounded and obstructed. Their screams of hurt and indignation are so shrill, that stars at the hem of the Milky Way gutter out like candles.

Their anchor is gone. The singular, perfect instrument they invested with their powers is destroyed. Horus is dead, and in the instant of his death, the grip of Chaos Incarnate is broken. The Old Four fall away, suddenly, hysterically, wailing in torment, dragging the warp with them.

There will be a future now, in whatever unholy form it takes. The death of Horus is the end of the isochronal instant he wove around himself. The infinite neverness of un-when, this Day of Days, ceases and becomes *then*, the past. Time falters, chokes on its own blood, and restarts, faltering and unsteady. Metaphysical continuity resumes. The clocks wind up, and start to tick, like gold dripping from a melting ceiling.

Ahzek Ahriman sets down his deck. Some of the cards have begun to discolour, like fallen leaves as the turn of winter blackens gold and red. He rises to his feet, towering and skeletal.

'What is it?' asks Sindermann. Ahriman raises a long finger sharply. He seems to be listening. Sindermann glances at Mauer and the frightened archivist. There is nothing to hear. No sound. No movement. The enclosing blackness that muffles the collection is completely silent, and it surrounds them so tightly, it feels as though they are the last four living souls on Terra.

'The books have stopped bleeding,' says Ahriman.

'And when you say that, you mean…?' Mauer asks.

The sorcerer looks at her sharply. What little humanity had previously been present in that cadaverous face and those startling blue eyes has been vacated. Mauer recoils. The look he gives her is the haughty menace of a jackal-god from some underworld.

'I mean what I say,' he growls. 'I had much to learn. I had only just begun. But now they speak no more.'

The sorcerer seems quietly angry. To Sindermann, more alarmingly still, the sorcerer also seems scared.

‘Has… has something happened?’ Sindermann asks cautiously. He doesn’t want to provoke, nor does he really want to hear the answer.

‘There has been a death,’ says Ahriman. ‘Unexpected. Unexplained.’

‘What death?’ Sindermann asks. ‘Who is dead?’

Ahriman doesn’t answer. He passes his bony hand across the small table, and his tarot deck vanishes. He turns, as though to leave.

‘Who is dead?’ Sindermann calls out.

The sorcerer looks back at them. His taut lips are peeled back from his black gums and snarling teeth.

‘You three have kept me from my studies, Kyril Sindermann,’ he whispers. ‘You have wasted my time with your questions…’

He pauses, thinking. Sindermann knows the sorcerer is debating whether to kill them or not. He has never been more afraid in his life.

‘I leave you to your fate,’ Ahriman says quietly. ‘What is coming will not be pleasant. Worse, I imagine, than anything I could devise.’

‘You’re leaving?’ Mauer asks, rigid with terror.

‘I have to go now,’ says Ahriman.

‘What has happened?’ Mauer asks. ‘Why now?’

He takes one last look at her before vanishing into the darkness.

‘Because now,’ he says, ‘there *is* a now again.’

Time’s pulse begins to race, thready but alive. It may never return to full health. The interlocked and fused strands of the other three material dimensions, so inevitably and unnaturally spliced, do not revive so easily or so cleanly. When Horus dies, and the four false gods who sponsored him flee into the

warp, the immaterial deluge recedes abruptly, sucking back into the empyrean like a swift-ebbing tide. This rapacious drawback leaves a vast area of the materium exposed and ruined, entirely jumbled and displaced by the immense etheric pressures that engulfed it. It is a catastrophic, maiming injury to realspace, and Terra is the entry wound.

The materium shudders in shock, released from the warp's grip. It goes into spasm around the eschatonic rupture, and tries to heal itself to close the wound. There is no surgeon to tend it, no ministering apothecary to set its bones and repair its organs. Seizing, and taut with traumatic pain, it repairs its own brutalised form in a clumsy paroxysm of utter despair.

Across the Solar Realm, and beyond, throughout the local galactic zone, the overlapped shells of realspace herniate and shear as the immaterial forces that bound them together, and into which they have congealed, drain away like fluid from a compound injury. It is a lengthy and calamitous process. The material universe quakes and flexes, protests and fractures, unevenly and indiscriminately resetting itself. The dwindling winds of neverness, excited into one last wild gale of abrasive fury, rip through it.

In the Solar Realm alone, another sixteen million people perish. Many are never seen again, not even as tattered corpses.

Terra is the heart of this cataclysm. As if it hadn't been punished enough, the Throneworld trembles, grinds and bulges. The warp streams out of it like blood from a butchered hog strung up by its heels. That which has been unnaturally intersected shears apart. That which has been comingled dissevers. The abhorrent cartography of Chaos is redrafted. The Dominions of the Palace of Terra sunder from the *Vengeful Spirit*'s palace of terror, which has invaded them like a feeding parasite. As in nature, the sudden and enforced separation of host and parasitoid leaves both sickly and atrophied. They slowly and cruelly shred apart, causing mutual harm, bleeding from the torn tissue that has grafted them

together, leaking from the fissures where their chimerical fabric was conjoined.

The other invasive realms withdraw, resecting to their ordained latitudes of time and place in frightful conflagrations. The pancosmic psychic facets conjured by the duel between father and son burst like carbuncles or snap back to their own whens along the numberless angles of space with whiplash force. The skeletonised City of Dust splits free, and drifts like an iceberg into the exoplanar gulf. The Marcher Fortress burns on the fringe of nothing. Calastar shatters loose, its impossibly artificed towers swaying. The Desert of Gods, where no idol is permitted to stand, sags and pours away like sand down the throat of an hourglass. The unquiet realms of the dead and the damned, the lost and the psychic part ways at the crossroads of inertia in Uigebealach. Dolmen Gates shudder, troubled in their long slumber. The psychoplastic flues and conduits of the webway creak and vibrate.

Other realms do not survive the wrenching transition at all. Islets of exoplanar matter and archipelagoes of haunted warp stars combust or implode. The worm-eaten fens of desolate Shabek, grey and forlorn, dissolve in the mist. Rancid, superheated steam swallows the twilit glades and painforests of shunned Long Woe, reducing it, in moments, to putrescent mush that drips into the dark abyss. The dry bone-beds of fossil gods reduce to ash, and blow away as the anaemic un-light fades. Somnopolis, the Library of Lost and Mislaid Dreams, perishes in a raging inferno, and is never more remembered.

The Inevitable City itself, unseen by human sight for centuries, except to that of the saintly or the insane, shelves away, a tilting continent and, over a period of eight hours, slides back into the midnight of the empyrean like some spectral parody of old Atlantis. It leaves a few parts of itself behind, tucked into lost corners and hidden dim edges. Some will later be found, but the stories of those discoveries are the province of other histories.

This history is barely intact. Time bends and flaps, unmoored. Memory lapses, wiped by the trauma of the realm's disintegration, or blanked through acts of will by those who have seen too much.

There are bodies behind him, and nothing ahead of him. He cannot remember how that came to be. What should be ahead of him? How do those corpses come to be there?

Where is here?

The… Palace. The Palace. The Sanctum. The final fortress. This is… this is… The Western Mass Passageway… or one of them. One of the main transit conduits. He can't remember which one it is. He doesn't recognise it.

He doesn't recognise himself.

He gets up off his knees. The pain in his head is so great, it seems as though his skull has been split by a chainblade, but when he feels his scalp and the back of his neck with his fingers, there is no wound. The pain is inside.

There is blood though. So much blood. Blood on his hands and arms, on his chest. Blood in his mouth. None of it seems to be his. It pools on the floor of the vast Mass Passageway behind him, and paints the walls like some parody of cave art rendered in arterial spray. It coats the mutilated bodies behind him.

They stretch out in a tangled carpet back along the passageway, for as far as he can see. Not a single one of them is whole. Bones are snapped and stripped, limbs twisted and unsocketed, flesh torn. Most seem to be traitors, Astartes betrayers of the Lupercal's host, or Traitor Excertus.

Most, not all. A few loyalists lie among the dead. He sees a flash of yellow plate here, a glint of white there, the emblem of a Solar Auxilia brigade. What was this battle? What fury visited here?

There's blood on his face. On his chin. He can taste its copper stink in his mouth and gullet. The blood is as red as his armour. It tastes the same as the crippling pain in his head. In

the blood and the pain lingers some residue of insanity and rage.

There's nothing in front of him. Ahead, the passageway is empty. Smoke drifts. He hears, in the distance, gunfire, the thump of explosions, the roar of voices. The battle is still raging, but it sounds like…

It sounds like panic. It sounds like rout. It sounds like the mayhem of overrun and collapse.

He tries to clear his head. He spits to clear blood from his mouth. He must move. He will surely be needed. The Palace is falling. Why can't he find his sword? Why can't he find his own name?

Someone approaches. An Astartes battle-brother is moving out of the emptiness ahead. He approaches warily. Why is his war-axe raised ready?

'What… what is this?' he cries out to the legionary, showing his hands empty and wishing they were not dripping with gore. The Astartes stops five metres away. He too is spattered in blood, his war plate dented and buckled. He keeps his axe raised.

'You can speak?' he calls out.

'What? Yes, of course!'

'Do you know me?' the Astartes demands.

'Yes!' he answers. He swallows. He has to think. A Space Wolf. A captain. He knows this battle-brother, but the pain in his head…

'Sartak,' he says. 'You are Odi Sartak.'

The Wolf of Fenris lowers his weapon slightly, but not entirely.

'Brother,' he says to the lone Wolf. 'Sartak… What is happening? I… I have lost my mind.'

'I would say so,' Sartak replies.

‘What do you mean? Tell me–’

‘The enemy is in retreat, Angel-son,’ says Sartak carefully. ‘Full retreat. It happened suddenly, just minutes ago. They had us cold, but now they are pouring out of the Palace like rats. Something has happened. No one knows what. There is a rumour that the Warmaster is dead. That the Emperor has vanquished him. But it’s just a rumour. No one knows anything. There’s panic everywhere. Can you fight?’

‘Yes,’ he replies.

‘Well, there’s fighting to be done. A great deal more. Impressive deeds to be performed. The traitors have turned back, and let go of their victory, but that doesn’t mean that victory is ours. Not by any means.’

He nods. He understands. ‘Sartak? Why you are wary of me?’

The Wolf sniffs. It’s almost a laugh. ‘You have no idea?’ Sartak asks.

‘No. I… I can’t remember. Do you know who I am?’

‘Of course. You are Nassir Amit of the Blood Angels Fifth Company.’

Amit. Nassir Amit. It comes back now, memories made of pain and torment, all of them glossy and red. Amit sways. He stumbles across the passageway, and leans against the wall to steady himself. Sartak watches him every step, his war-axe ready.

‘Give me a moment, brother,’ Amit says. He tries to clear his throat again. He will never be rid of that taste. ‘I will come with you. Fighting to be done, as you say. We must secure our position. We…’

Sartak waits.

‘Horus is dead?’ Amit asks.

‘Let’s hope.’

Amit straightens up.

‘Will you lower the axe?’ he asks. ‘Can you lower your axe?’

Sartak frowns for a moment, then slowly eases the axe down.

Amit wipes his mouth. He looks back at the long and grisly line of bodies.

‘Wolf?’ he asks. ‘Why do the bodies stop here?’

‘Because this is as far as you got,’ replies Odi Sartak.

The sudden evacuation of the warp takes the blight of Chaos with it.

As the immaterial flood drains out of Terra, and the sacked Dominions of the Imperial Palace, so the clutch of Chaos loosens. The powers and gifts of the eightfold gods abandon their followers, leaving them bereaved and dispossessed. Stung by defeat and maddened by loss, the powers of Chaos quit the material realm without warning or notice.

The Imperium is freed from Chaos in one death stroke. It withers so swiftly, and so completely, few on either side of the war believe its threat will ever recover.

Time, now limping but operational, will tell.

The loss is so abrupt, it leaves the conquering traitor host quite bereft. A cold falls upon them, as if they have been eviscerated. It feels like the shock of an unanaesthetised battlefield amputation. There is a yawning emptiness, a gap, a space where something should be. What belonged to them, and defined them, is gone.

Some plunge into insanity, some into grief. Some collapse in despair, some sink into fugue. Many just die.

Lament fills the air. The chanting stops, the war-horns fall silent. The imperative of conquest is stolen from them, even as they grind the Palace to grit beneath their heels, and raze it with their flames.

In truth, they had won. The Palace had fallen to their siege. But for a few square metres, a few pockets of resistance, a few lines of suicidal defiance, the Palace was theirs.

And in this moment, it means nothing. They forget what they were trying to accomplish, or the triumph that it signified. They forget even why such a thing mattered to them, or what motive drove them on.

Some just stop motionless when it happens, vacant with stupefaction. They are killed where they stand, slaughtered by the loyalists' blades and guns. Others fall back, the fire gone out of them, and find themselves hounded to extinction as they attempt to flee.

Others, remembering at least their military skills, or too damaged to know better, keep fighting.

The fighting lasts for days to come. The Siege of Terra becomes a long, bloody, lingering repulse. Across the Dominions of the Palace, and the slaughterfields of Terra beyond, conflict continues long after the death of Horus. Loyalist forces, in their own way as shocked and disbelieving as their foes, drive back with revived vigour and unsparing vengeance.

The surviving loyalist forces are weary, weak and horribly diminished. They kill all they can kill, they purge all they can purge, they make every effort possible to prosecute the traitor retreat and thwart their flight. Such is their wrath, it is calculated later that if the loyalist armies had but a third more warriors surviving at the moment of the Warmaster's death, no single traitor would have escaped the Throneworld alive. In the annals of history, the Siege of Terra would have become a footnote to the Massacre of Terra.

Still, the traitors flee. They flee to their transports and their drop-craft. They flee to orbit. They flee to their fleet, or to those parts of it that have not themselves fled or been destroyed by the time the evacuating ground forces arrive. They flee in blind panic. They flee in grief. They flee screaming.

Some disengage in systematic military order, fighting as they fall back, held together by the last threads of discipline and dignity, or by loyalty to their regiment or company or Legion,

bound by the few commanders who have retained the wit and composure to orchestrate a coherent active withdrawal.

That portion of the traitor host that escapes Terra and the downfall of their cause, and it is a considerable number, runs for the stars. They understand the wrath that is pursuing them from the broken walls of the Palace, and the implacable retribution that is approaching the Throneworld beneath the banner of Ultramar.

None of them sue for surrender or offer terms.

Or if they do, no loyal son of Terra bothers to listen.

Dirty smoke is blowing sideways across the shattered rockcrete of the Canis Causeway. The surface of the wide avenue is littered with debris and pockmarked with craters. In the ruins to his left, he can hear the pop and thump of bolter fire.

Maximus Thane walks on, the burning monolith of the Palace behind him. There is a limp to his step, but he ignores the pain. He remembers the last time he stood here. It is literally impossible to tell how long ago that was. It feels like hours. It feels like his whole life. He stood here, facing the sundered arch of the Lion's Gate, with just shy of seventy men, all Imperial Fists of the 22nd Exemplars, locking tight into *Repulse Formation Exactus*. They are dead now, all of them.

He looks towards the gate, or what remains of it. It, like him, was supposed to keep the enemy out.

Blood spots the rockcrete beside him, leaving a trail as he walks. It is dripping from the cracked and twisted warhammer that swings low at his side. The Sons of Horus who shed that blood are behind him somewhere, crumpled in the causeway ditch. He can see their brethren, almost a company strong, fleeing in the distance towards the ruined gate. Thane doesn't think they'll get that far. He thinks they'll turn. 'My life for Lupercal!' That's what they used to boast. Well, their lives for nothing now. They'll want to die on their feet. They'll want to

die fighting. Whatever else they are, they're Astartes, and Astartes don't run.

That suits him fine. He wants to avenge the seventy brothers who once stood this ground with him.

He glances over his shoulder. Though the 22nd Exemplars are long gone, he is not alone. The men and women advancing behind him are caked in dust. No two of them are from the same company or regiment. Excertus, Auxilia, Old Hundred, a Wolf of Fenris, a White Scars outrider, a Salamanders Pyre Warden, a X Legion centurion.

They number over a thousand.

'They're turning,' says the warrior at his side.

Thane knows. He's seen it. The Sons of Horus are swinging around to form a defensive line across the causeway. Just as he expected, just as he hoped.

'Ready?' Thane asks. But he knows the prentice-brother is more than ready. Nor is he a prentice any more. Demeny is a brother now, plain and simple, tested and tempered in the forge of war.

Demeny clasps the long grip of Berendol's greatsword in both hands. He has the broad blade resting across his right pauldron.

Thane raises his chipped and broken hammer high in the air. He doesn't have to say anything. The roar of a thousand voices builds behind him.

They start to run.

So ends the Day of Days. It closes in fire and damnation. It has kept none of its nefarious promises, or made good on its venomous threats. It sinks into a bloody twilight where the only currencies are wayment, misery and loss. In this half-light of ash and tragedy, all colour bleeds and fades. The empyreal hosts of Horus Warmaster lose their darkling majesty and their degenerate lustre. They lumber as revenant outcasts in the

twilight gloom, their souls scorched, their banners lank and meaningless, seeking solace, absolution and escape.

Where is their fury now? Where is their purpose and their certainty? Where is the unquenchable devotion that brought them to the brink of triumph, and almost won them the galaxy whole?

Gone, gone into the dusk, gone into the flame, gone so utterly it might never have existed at all.

Gone with it are the allies that stood with them. The baying legions of daemonkind do not retreat. They vanish into smoke, into dust, into the dismal rain. As the warp declines, so the Neverborn become extinct upon the material plane, for their embodiments and possessions cannot endure in the mundane realm. They depart, unwilling and thwarted, as night begins to fall, and leave their screams upon the air. Those keening wails of anguish and spite become the evensong of the dying day, and those who hear them, traitor and loyalist alike, will never forget them. The screams of daemons will haunt them for the rest of their lives, and wake them in the dark of other midnights.

From the smallest vermin breed gnawing bones and collecting skulls amid the corpse heaps, to the cloven-hooved arch-fiends piercing the sky with their obscene horns, the Neverborn decay and de-manifest. They leave smog behind them, foul air, a spatter of ichor as their protean forms deliquesce, the dew of their blood, the rotting stench of their brief and heinous incarnations.

But they remain in the memories of those who have seen them as an indelible stain. Daemons have walked the face of the world. Their teratoid horror has been seen by human eyes, and felt by human senses. Though the Neverborn vanish in a blizzard of dissolution, the fact of them lingers. The daemons endure, in peripheral memory, in pouncing nightmares, in the shuttered rooms of sanity and the cellars of thought, in that shadow there, by the window, where the sunlight does not reach.

The daemons will always be here, now.

Sojuk of the White Scars should be dead. Since the Gate closed, he has fought on, sometimes alone, sometimes with the few who had been able to stand with him. He has roamed the dereliction of the Palatine, hunting for the enemy, and the enemy has not been hard to find. At every step, he was ready to sell his life for the highest price. They all were, the life-sellers left outside the walls.

But the daemons could not kill him, and now they seem to be gone. The traitors could not kill him, and they appear to have turned in sudden retreat. No one has been able to afford his price.

Not even the Blood Angels. When the sons of Sanguinius turned, it shocked Sojuk to the core. It did not seem to him an act of treason, for the Angels of Baal turned on friend and foe alike. It seemed more like a madness, a hatred of war itself whereby, deranged beyond a point of control, the Blood Angels tried to destroy war and life in its totality.

Sojuk understands the feeling. When there is nothing left of a man's life except destruction, it consumes him and he becomes destruction. In a way, the Blood Angels were simply being more honest than him. They had dispensed with any discrimination. No distinction between brother or traitor. They merely killed whatever was in front of them. There was something pure about that apocalyptic frenzy.

It had its uses too. At Hindress Fort and Manciple Gard, the frenzied and uncontrolled actions of the Blood Angels broke and drove back large traitor divisions that could not have been stopped otherwise. He saw it with his own eyes. War broken by a berserk fury. Angels turned to daemons to fight the daemons. Perhaps it was some last wish of the Emperor that His sons should meet the enemy on their own infernal terms.

Sojuk stayed clear of it. He had no wish to fight the Blood Angels, nor any desire to be torn apart by them.

It’s quieter now. Something has changed. He descends the fractured terraces of the Cydonae gunline, into the crushed gutter of the Sanctus Wall. The sky has gone yellow, and there is a light to the north that feels like sunrise. The enemy is definitely in retreat. What has broken them? They held the field so completely. It wasn’t the Blood Angels. The madness of the Angels hurt them, but it could not have turned them back in such a wholesale fashion. And the Blood Angels themselves, the few he has seen in the last twenty minutes, seem to have been released from their madness. He has seen some of them, wandering, dazed, or weeping in the ruins. He thinks, perhaps, that the sudden passing of their raging fit and the breaking of the enemy advance are connected, symptoms of the same thing. Something has definitely changed.

He sinks to his knees, and lays his sword on the rockcrete beside him. He finds himself in the most unexpected place of all. Alive. He was so resigned to death, so ready for it, but it never came or found the right price.

Sojuk realises he is sobbing. It isn’t relief. It’s shock. Death had been so certain, and now nothing is certain. He doesn’t understand the world any more. It almost feels like victory, but he doesn’t trust it, because it also feels like defeat. Perhaps this is what it feels like when everything is lost, even the certainty of death.

He hears a noise, unmistakable. He looks up in time to see three jetbikes pass overhead at high velocity, banking to the east. They are bikes of his Legion. The false sunlight glints on their flanks as they turn. They are chasing down the fleeing traitors eight kilometres out. Sojuk didn’t know any were still operational.

He instantly wants to be one of them. He feels the yearn of yarak. He wants to chase into the distance. If men of the Keshig still have a purpose, then there is some meaning left in the world. It just hasn’t been shared with him.

Sojuk rises to his feet and watches the glinting specks as they run off east. He feels the spirit of his Khagan. Whether the

Great Khan of Khans is alive or dead, he is riding still, and sons ride with him, ever onwards.

Where all he thought he had left was death, Sojuk finds he has hope, and hope has cost him more than death ever could.

This end, then, is the end of dreams, this death the death of certainty. All that mankind trusted as empirical fact is excised from the human psyche, and in its place is crudely transplanted the sly nightmares of the possible. Hearts beat differently now, minds tilt at an unsettled angle. The limit of what is possible has been extended beyond the wall of reason into the dark forests of the imagination, where few have dared to venture. Anything has become possible, and thus nothing is unimaginable. There is no longer consolation in rationality. Mankind stands at the foot of a hollow mountain filled with doubt and the darkness of unknowing. The candles of science and axiom will not stay lit in the night wind. The only light that can act as a guide is faith, as blind and indefinable as the darkness it seeks to illuminate.

Mankind can now imagine the worst, and every time it does so, from this moment on, the worst will be worse still.

The greatest dream of all, the cherished dream to which mankind has clung, and in which it has invested, the spine that keeps the very idea of the Imperium upright, is broken. The dream, a polished mosaic of fact and truth, is bleeding out on the deck of a burning flagship, and nothing can staunch the wounds. The great and ordered plan in which the future was modelled, with a craftsman's eye for perfect scale and exquisite detail, is undone.

His vision of the future has failed.

Vision, gone. Audio, hyper-distorted. Sensoria, crashed.

The noospheric space she inhabits, and which is her entire world, is no longer attached to the universe.

<query>

Eyet-One-Tag, Speaker of the Epta War-Stead linked unity, struggles to understand the riddle of data. The data will not

flow. The data will not obey her.

<query/priority>

She considers, first, that the slaves of the False Omnissiah have unleashed some weapons-grade scrap code in a last-ditch effort to postpone their extirpation. They have tried everything else. They have tried their methods of meat and metal.

But that is an error assumption. There is no invasive scrap code in the war-stead's noospheric unity. Besides, the slaves of the False Omnissiah have nothing that can break the coded walls of her data-fortress. Their technologies, even those purloined from Mars by the treacherous adepts who rejected the sequences of Moravec to stand with the Terran Emperor, are status poor/inadequate compared to the combat-ware at her disposal.

Hers were granted and loaded by the Fifth Disciple of Nul. Why are they status invalid?

<query>

The unity does not respond.

The riddle of data refuses solution.

Why is her face wet?

Eyet-One-Tag rewinds her data record to the point before the sensoria crash. Her unity was advancing to location Hasgard Gate in support of Advance Beta Trice Astartes XVI. <verified> Advance Beta Trice Astartes XVI had meat-engaged with status poor/inadequate resistance at location Hasgard Gate. <verified> Elements of Astartes IX, Astartes V and Astartes VII had been identified. <verified> Skitarii Tr4.ki macroclade had been deployed to support Advance Beta Trice Astartes XVI. <verified> Estimate of compliance three hundred and sixty-one seconds. <verified>

It has been more than three hundred and sixty-one seconds.

Advance Beta Trice Astartes XVI reported sudden aberrant behaviour displayed by Astartes IX units. They quote 'have become deranged. They are insane with some form of rage'

end quote. They quote ‘are fighting like animals, without any technique’ end quote. They quote ‘are drinking blood from the dead’ end quote.

There is no supplementary data. Advance Beta Trice Astartes XVI is unresponsive. Is this lack of response connected to the sensoria crash or merely simultaneous?

<query>

The unity does not respond.

Why is her face wet?

She conducts a deeper diagnostic review. It is not a riddle of data. It is a loss of data. Significant portions of the data-current have been removed. Parts of her own data-shadow are missing.

The linked unity does not respond because there is no linked unity.

She is alone and blind and mute.

What is missing is the immaterial medium that the war-stead was using as a conductive agent for their data-current. What is missing from her is the immaterial component that gave her purpose and function.

The warp is unavailable. The warp has been discontinued.

She is unsupported.

Eyet-One-Tag disengages from the noosphere to obtain data via other functions. She initialises old tactile and physical instrumentation that she thought she would never have to use again.

Obsolete meat applications restart like a kick in the face. She now possesses pain. Flesh pain. She now possesses discomfort due to loss of body heat. She now possesses misalignment in physical equilibrium. She has fallen.

She has fallen from her palanquin, because her palanquin has overturned. Her palanquin has overturned because the clade-thralls supporting it have fled. Her face is wet because she is lying in the mire. She touches her face. Both the act of

touching and her face are unfamiliar. The augmetic sensor blisters that cover her skull from the mouth up are dead, or operating at low power. Some have cracked, the plastek fragmenting, and are leaking cybernovial fluid. Her semi-blindness and deafness are explained. Resolution is poor. Low-resolution heat track only. She should have kept a meat eye and a meat ear during elective mechamorphosis, in case of emergencies like this.

She shivers, another unfamiliar sensation. It is the cold of the ooze, the bitter wind, the rain. It is also shame. She was so beautiful, admired by many for the elegant asymmetric proportions of her augmentations, and the aesthetics of her implant cysts. She does not want anyone to see her when they are damaged and cracked. She hates that her beauty has been scarred.

Hate, another unfamiliar feature of meat-mode.

Fear, another.

Something approaches. She cowers. Her heat-adapted cyst, in feeble low-res, identifies it as a skitarius. She does not want it to see her, but she needs its help. She calls to it with the meat mouth she kept to serve as unity speaker and communicate with unmodified humans. It does not understand. Her mouth cannot produce hard cipher or code speak.

But it hears her, and moves closer. It picks her up out of the cold mud. Her wasted legs, dormant for so long, will not support her weight, so she clings to it. As her arms embrace its broad, muscle-corded torso tenderly, she extends a dendrite from the middle finger of her right hand and installs it into the base of the skitarius' spine. It shudders at the invasion of the lumbar puncture.

She needs its sensoria. She needs its eyes.

It is called Ultr-5V, and belongs to Tr4.ki macroclade. It is male-derived. It is a him. Like her, he is damaged. Like her, he is seeking data. He does not seem to mind that she is so hideous and unsightly. They cling together, like lovers dancing

in the rain, arms around each other. Via the puncture link, he asks her a torrent of questions in binharic that she cannot answer.

Eyet-One-Tag accesses his eyes and acoustic installs. They are functional. Imperfect, but far better than her crashed systems. She can see and hear again. She can see and hear through his skull.

The world around her is revealed, the real world, unmodified by noospherics. It is far better resolution than the ghost heat-paint her broken sensoria could produce. Skitarii optics are battle-hardened and high-gain.

Her palanquin, her regal carriage, is indeed overturned. The mud is thick, and the rain is so heavy it looks like vertical streaks of static distort. The battle engines of the war-stead loom around her, abandoned. Some are burning in the rain. She sees the heat of the fire, the swirl of the smoke colour-graded according to temperature. Not far away, not more than fifty-two point six metres, the immense engine-mount of Clain Pent, Fifth Disciple of Nul, lies on its side. It too is ablaze. Such a loss, an old and thoroughbred creature like that, hobbled and laid low. There is no sign of Clain Pent.

She lets Ultr-5V dance her around slowly in a circle, her face against his chest, her arms around his back. She needs a three-sixty view. Where is the war-stead? Where are the thralls? Where are the others like Ultr-5V?

The engines all around her, even her palanquin, are decaying. She sees rust flaking and billowing from their hulls, staining the rain red. The immaterial energy that infused them, and gave them vigour and vitality, is gone. Without it, the metals and plasteks that compose them are succumbing to years of wear and use in minutes, withering before her eyes.

She knows she is too.

The warp has left them. It has left them to their fate. It has forsaken them in a stark, material world of mud and cold and

liquid and filth, unsupported, unlinked, and vulnerable to decay and corrosion.

Through the skitarius' eyes, she sees figures approaching. They are coming through the rain, through the burning ruins of the camp. Their war plate is red, like the rust and the rain. It is also smeared with organic residue, which is also red. They are Astartes IX.

They are approaching slowly, calmly, what she would classify as rationally. Whatever feral madness afflicted them, as reported by Advance Beta Trice Astartes XVI, it appears to have abated. Eyet-One-Tag deduces the sudden cessation of the immaterial medium has shocked them back to stability. She wonders what caused their rage to begin with. A loss, a wound perhaps. Whatever it was, it cannot be anything compared to the loss she has suffered.

The Astartes IX are no longer berserk. But they are Astartes IX, and they are highly skilled in methods of meat and metal.

They approach. She does not bid Ultr-5V to engage them and protect her. He is as scared as she is.

They hold each other tight. She closes his eyes.

This is the end and the death.

There is no victory to be claimed, not for those who came here to seize it, nor for those who fought to prevent them. Terra, disfigured, writhes in a delirium of its own pain, flinching to ease the agony of one wound, only to tear open another. Each flinch is a tectonic spasm that furrows continents. Each contraction is a seismic rictus that cracks the spines of landmasses and grinds their bones. Its mouth is filled with its own blood, and its blood is magma fire.

Some will wonder, in the years to come, if the Throneworld should be left to die. It is too broken, too tainted, too contaminated by the poisons of war and warp. Any other world so fundamentally exposed to the immaterium, and to the blight of Chaos, would be discarded in an instant, shunned forever or sterilised by Exterminatus.

But it is Terra. It is the cradle of the species. It is the earth from which the seed of humanity grew. The thought of its abandonment is inconceivable.

For to perish in a war is one thing, to survive quite another. Survival carries its own burden, an obligation that is, in its way, more onerous than war itself. No matter the injuries a survivor has sustained, no matter how mutilated and close to death war has left them, be they human soul or planet, they have endured, and so they inherit the reckoning of war. It is their solemn duty to preserve the cause for which they suffered, and for which so many died, for if that cause is not remembered, then war is just an empty horror. Those who find themselves alive when the war with Horus ends are so benumbed, they long for the release of oblivion. But they must live, to honour those that did not. They must remember, for those that no longer can.

A cause must survive the war for which it has been fought. This is all the dead expect of those they leave behind. Make sense of us. Make sense of that which seems so senseless. We are gone, but you remain.

Remember not the way we fell, or how. Remember why.

‘Wait,’ says Fafnir Rann. Zephon glances at him. Rann knows the look. It means *no stopping*. Rann feels it too. If they stop now, either of them, they’ll never start again. The wounds they have both sustained will kill them, for only determination is keeping them upright.

Still, he says, ‘Wait.’

The traitor host is in disarray. It has shuddered backwards from the devastation of Hasgard, and is pouring south towards the rockcrete canyons of the Palatine Way.

No one knows why. No one knows anything. But Rann, Zephon and the few other survivors of the Hasgard stand have clambered from the bloody rubble and given chase.

It is laughable. A handful of men, grievously injured, some almost dead on their feet, staggering after a host of thousands.

None of them have any idea what their pursuit can achieve. But better this meaningless something than nothing. To stop is to die.

The men with them have come to a halt. Like Zephon, they stand and watch, bemused, as Rann scrambles up a slope of debris. The landscape, as far as any of them can see, is almost entirely bodies, mounds of tangled Astartes war plate piled in the sucking mire. Rann clambers his way up a heap of the dead.

Behind him, Leod Baldwin grunts something. Baldwin can't talk, because half his face is missing.

'What are you doing, Lord-Son-Of-Dorn?' Namahi calls out.

Rann glances back at them as he continues his climb.

'Wait!' he shouts. He looks at them for a moment, the pride of the Imperium brought to this. A few White Scars, a few Imperial Fists, disfigured and torn, their plate now as red as Zephon's. There are some other Blood Angels among them too. They are ashen and haunted. Their rage collapsed just as the traitors broke. Another mystery that cannot be explained. No one knows anything.

And that's why Rann has told them to wait. They need something. Night is falling, perhaps forever. This place, Hasgard, was where they were going to die, and they may yet die here. Mindlessly chasing the enemy is not enough. They are exhausted, broken, bleeding out both literally and metaphorically. Whether they catch up with the enemy or not, most of them will not live another hour.

Rann blocks out the pain of his wounds. He finds what he glimpsed from below as they advanced. He reaches for it, and struggles to free it. Corpses slide and clatter down the heap as he disturbs them.

It comes free, the grip of the dead broken. He pulls himself upright and raises it so that the men below can see it.

It is a standard of the Imperium, a banner of the Emperor. The pole is bent and the cloth torn. The aquila is missing from

the finial. The banner itself is so soaked in blood that its symbols and heraldry are hard to make out.

But they know what it is.

Rann raises it aloft, ignoring the blood that drips from its hem onto his face, ignoring the blood that is running down his back and chest from the wounds in his shoulders and neck as the effort of raising the standard pulls them open.

'For the Emperor!' he yells.

This is the end and the death. The *Vengeful Spirit*, mighty fortress ship, tears away from the fabric of the Imperial Palace, toppling backwards into realspace as the warp weeps out of it. It is profoundly damaged. Clouds of debris billow from its flanks as time, and seven other contradictory dimensions, pull upon it in opposition. Hull plates peel like snakeskin, flayed by empyric compression. The superstructure squeals and moans as extreme stress distorts its framework. It is gradually and brutally realigned to an orbital position it never really left.

It tries to recompose itself. It tries, screaming from every rivet and stanchion, to remember what it used to be, and to become that thing again, but its memory is unreliable, and its sense of self blotched by amnesia and dementia, and the pain is too great. It thought it was a city. It thought it was a palace, and a court. It thought it was a house of gods. It is suddenly none of those things.

It is no longer even where it thought it was. It is barely even a ship.

Somewhere deep inside its rolling, juddering mass, Dorn and Valdor fight to keep their footing. Decks that were made of meat are suddenly plasteel again. Walls and bulkheads that were cartilage and bone are adamantine and ceramite. It is raining from the ceiling, torrents of water and oil from ruptured tanks and burst hydraulics. The rain sluices away the last dregs of blackened warpflux and immaterial residue from the walls, and foams around their feet in a reeking, curdled froth.

Klaxons are sounding, on and off, blaring then faulting out. Cascades of sparks from shorting systems shower down in the drenching rain.

They have killed a thousand daemons in the darkness just to get this far, but now the daemons are all gone. Neither Dorn nor Valdor has spoken a word in a long time, not even when the Neverborn suddenly deserted the ship and the decks began to pitch and quake. They both know something has fundamentally altered.

They both know that despite their efforts, despite the thousand daemons they have killed to get this far, they are probably too late.

One step at a time, they advance through the torrential downpour, bracing themselves against the streaming walls to stay on their feet as the deck tilts and rocks. Loose debris flies past them, and unsecured equipment tumbles across the floor. They duck loops of cables swinging from the ruptured ceiling, the severed ends hissing and spitting weak cinders of power. They hear the tortured subframe of the vessel uttering its harsh metallic scream as it is twisted and deformed. They smell smoke, the hot stink of fires surging unchecked through broken compartments. Steam swirls from the chambers of the ship where pouring water and roaring flames have met.

‘He’s dead,’ says Constantin at last, as Dorn steadies him.

‘Who?’ asks Dorn.

Valdor does not answer.

They come to the first of the skulls. Or, rather, the skulls come to them. One or two at first. Human skulls, burned and cracked, jawless, rolling and bouncing down the broken deck like loose rocks from a landslip, carried by the foamy water. Then more, skulls and dirty bones borne by the flood, spinning and clattering around their ankles. So many. They cannot bear to estimate a number, or imagine where they came from.

‘Here!’ Dorn shouts, splashing forward. He grips the plasteel rungs of a through-deck ladder bolted to the wall. There’s a

light above them, a crepuscular glow.

‘Wait,’ warns Constantin. Dorn sees that the captain-general has turned, spear raised, peering back into the darkness behind them. Dorn steps to his side, sword ready. The rain drizzles off their armour. Perhaps not all the daemons have fled after all.

Constantin frowns, gazing into the dark. He lowers his spear.

‘Coros?’ he calls.

Dorn sees them now. Diocletian Coros and three other Sentinels from Valdor’s company, making their way up the rain-swept hallway behind them.

‘We followed the storm, as you directed,’ is all Coros says when he reaches them. Valdor nods. Dorn, at his side, shakes his head wearily. It is all so matter-of-fact. There is no real acknowledgment of reunion, no relief. If these had been his men, he would have embraced them. If this had been Diamantis and–

He puts the thought aside. He clamps his Huscarl’s sword to his hip, and turns to the ladder.

He leads the way. They climb through the falling water to the next deck level. The walls are streaming wet here too, and lamps are burning, emergency lumen units in wire cages, casting a harsh, blue light.

The glare is ultraviolet, emergency lighting and decontam systems. But power is failing and fluctuating. The lights are at half-power already, and they are starting to tremble and fade.

A large hatch ahead of them stands open. Dorn walks through it, drawing his blade.

He stops when he sees what lies before him.

The great chamber is ravaged and derelict. There does not seem to be a single part of it that is not damaged or scarred. The cracked deck is littered with rubble and debris, and smears of meat and blood that might once have been human.

To one side lie the fused, incinerated remains of a Custodian proconsul. To the other–

To the other, his brother. Sanguinius. Dorn knew the Angel was dead. The woman told him so. He thought he had prepared himself. But to see it, to actually see it… To see the corpse, so brutally mauled and so casually discarded…

In the centre of the chamber is Horus Lupercal. He is crumpled on his side, his war plate scorched and blackened around the cadaver it contains. The empty sockets of Horus' broiled skull gaze at Dorn. His de-fleshed jaw is twisted open in a scream.

Nearby, a solitary Astartes kneels in vigil beside the other body.

Constantin was right, whichever way he meant it. He's dead.

They're both dead.

10:xix

Revelation

Loken looks up at them as they approach. There's nothing to be said.

Dorn, gazing in disbelief, gestures for him to move back. He kneels in Loken's place at his father's side.

'You cannot die,' Dorn says. 'Not now.'

The Emperor is lying on his back. He does not stir. Dorn uncouples his right gauntlet, and lays his bare hand gently on the auramite breastplate. There is scarcely a trace of life, no heartbeat he can feel, no rise and fall of the lungs. One of his father's eyes is closed, the other gone entirely. His skin is cold and pale, and his hair is matted with blood. The injuries he has sustained to his arm, his body and his head are catastrophic. Dorn cranes in and listens. There is just a trace of breath, a wheezing, laboured rattle of air in his throat.

Dorn knows that sound. He's heard it too many times. He's heard it in men and Astartes alike. The fact that his father is a demigod giant, with a demigod giant's biology, doesn't matter. It is the sound of mortality. It is the soft footsteps of death as it approaches.

'You cannot die,' he repeats, but there's nothing he can do to prevent it. The Emperor's wounds are awful to behold. No medicae science that Dorn knows of can repair this damage. This is the end and the death. He can see it. He can hear it.

'He fought,' Loken says quietly. 'Then He fell the moment Horus was finished. It was as though… as though He kept Himself alive, by force of will, just long enough to strike that final blow. He had been injured so badly by then…'

'You were here?' asks Dorn, not looking up. His voice is no more than a whisper.

‘I was,’ Loken replies. ‘My lord, I did all I could–’

‘I have no doubt of that, Loken,’ says Dorn. He takes a deep breath to control the grief crushing his chest. ‘What matters is what we do now.’

Dorn looks up at Constantin and is shocked by what he sees. Valdor is gazing down at the Emperor’s body, and his eyes are full of tears. Coros and the other Sentinels are clearly weeping too. It is not their expression of grief that shocks Dorn. To hear the lament of the Custodes would be unbearable. But this is utterly silent, and somehow far worse.

‘Constantin,’ he says. ‘Constantin. We need to get him out of this place.’

Valdor nods. He clears his throat.

‘He lives yet,’ he replies. ‘I can feel it. Tribune?’

Coros steps forward.

‘Teleport homing beacons are active, my captain,’ Coros says. ‘No signal responds. Noosphere is down. Vox is down. Retrying to establish contact.’

‘There isn’t time,’ says Loken. He can no longer hear the Master of Mankind in his head. He can no longer sense the light of Him, and the flames on Rubio’s blade have gone out. The Custodes may be more sensitive, for they are more closely bound to the Emperor, but Loken can feel that extinction is but a few breaths away. ‘There’s no time to make contact. We must carry Him–’

‘Loken is right,’ says Dorn. It is getting very cold, and the chamber around them has grown very dark. The air processors have shut down, and the atmosphere is leaking away. He and Valdor have seen the damage for themselves. The ship is dying too. From all around come the groans and sighs of its decline, bulkheads creaking, and the hull-frame cracking. Every now and then, debris flutters down from the sagging ceiling. The deck trembles beneath him, like the aftershocks of an earthquake. Like the Master of Mankind, the flagship is trying in vain to endure the mutilation it has suffered.

‘We carry him,’ Dorn says. ‘We carry him now.’

‘To where?’ asks Valdor. ‘Back the way we came?’

‘That way no longer exists,’ says Loken. ‘The ship has torn free of the Palace. It is no longer possible to walk from one to the other.’

Valdor glares at him, then looks back at Dorn.

‘The nearest embarkation deck, then,’ says Dorn. ‘We find a ship. A Stormbird.’

Valdor nods. The Sentinels close in and, with Valdor, Dorn and Loken, start to lift the Emperor up. The moment they raise Him a little, His head flops back and black blood streams from His mouth like water.

‘Set Him down!’ cries Valdor. ‘Set Him down again! We’re just killing Him faster.’

They ease the Emperor back to the deck. Dorn glances around.

‘Get a deck plate,’ he says to Coros, ‘wall panels… Anything we can use to fashion some frame to support him.’

The Sentinels turn to obey, but halt abruptly and bring their weapons up in defensive postures. There are figures standing in the shadow of the hatchway, lurking like revenant spectres.

They are the surviving Blood Angels from the Anabasis company. Raldoron, Ikasati, Furio and perhaps a dozen others. They are gazing at the scene in mute shock.

Valdor strides forward before Dorn can stop him, his spear circling in his grip.

‘If you’ve come for more killing, there’s nothing left to kill!’ he roars.

‘Constantin!’ Dorn shouts, grabbing his arm.

‘They are animals!’ Valdor rages. ‘Animals drawn to blood!’

‘No longer, Constantin! Look at them! Look at them!’

The Angel's sons are pale and viced with grief, but there is no rage in them, no fury. Valdor shrugs off Dorn's restraining hand.

'I trust them not,' he growls.

'Raldoron,' says Dorn, stepping towards the Blood Angels. 'When last we met, you were the wild beasts that Constantin describes.'

'When last we met, Lord Praetorian,' Raldoron replies, his voice quiet and creased with pain, 'we were in the Palace of Terra. Whatever madness overtook us, it has passed. It has been replaced by this.'

He looks towards the bodies behind Dorn: the Emperor, Horus and the Great Angel.

'I would rather that madness than this,' whispers the First Captain.

'I do not doubt it,' says Dorn. 'We are composing an exit, First Captain. As rapidly as we can. The Emperor is still alive. We will bring your father, my brother, too. Sanguinius cannot be left here. See to him.'

Raldoron nods. He swallows hard, jaw clenched.

'And the Warmaster, my lord?' he asks.

'Damn him,' Valdor rumbles. 'Let him burn with his ship.'

Dorn glances at him. 'Constantin–'

'My lords!'

They all turn. Diocletian Coros stands, head bowed, his hand to the side of his war helm.

'I have contact,' Coros reports. 'Degraded, vox only. But it is Hegemon Command.'

'On my system too,' says Ikasati.

'Instruct them!' Valdor snaps. His own armour's vox-system is long burned out.

‘Hegemon Command, Hegemon Command, this is Anabasis,’ says Coros urgently. ‘We need immediate teleport extraction. Repeat, Anabasis requires immediate teleport extraction. Lock on to my homing beacon, and set mass transfer, group extraction. Respond. Respond.’

He pauses, then repeats the instruction.

‘Hurry, Coros!’ Valdor growls.

‘The link is poor, my captain,’ Coros replies. ‘Stand by.’

He repeats the instruction again.

Loken looks away. He returns to the Emperor’s side, and kneels.

‘They will bear you home, my lord,’ he says softly. ‘Do not die. Your Palace awaits you. My lord, I cannot imagine a future that does not have you in it. We need you to guide us, and show us how to put back what has been undone.’

‘He can’t hear you, Loken.’

Loken looks around. Leetu is standing a few paces away.

‘You’re alive,’ says Loken.

Leetu nods. He clamps *Mourn-It-All* to his hip, and runs his hands back across his scalp. He seems exhausted. His eyes are hollow, and his armour has an odd sheen to it, as though it has been exposed to extreme heat.

‘What happened to you?’ Loken asks.

Leetu shakes his head.

‘I…’ he says. ‘I cannot speak of it. I don’t know how to describe it. I saw things, Loken. Things I can’t explain. I think I should be dead, but then they all vanished and I found myself here.’

‘Loken?’ Dorn calls out, approaching them. ‘Who is this man?’

‘LE Two, my lord,’ says Loken. ‘He fought alongside me, and with your father. I will vouch for him.’

Leetu bows his head to the Praetorian. Dorn studies him with a wary glare.

‘Lord Dorn,’ says Leetu. ‘There is a chamber nearby, just off this one.’ He turns and gestures to the far side of the compartment. ‘I think the Warmaster used it as a… shrine. A trophy room, perhaps. It is piled with bones. I think you should go to it before you leave.’

‘Why would I do that?’ Dorn asks.

‘Because I believe the skull of your brother Ferrus Manus is there,’ says Leetu.

Dorn flinches. He nods curtly to Leetu, and strides away across the deck in the direction the legionary indicated.

‘We await extraction,’ says Loken.

‘It can’t come fast enough,’ Leetu replies. ‘This damned ship is dead. Hear that? That’s the death-scream of superstructure, Loken. The Emperor–’

‘He’s alive,’ says Loken. Leetu crouches beside him. He stares at the Emperor’s body, and reluctantly reaches to feel for a pulse.

‘Barely,’ he says. ‘And the damage done to Him… I don’t think that can be repaired.’

‘We have to try,’ says Loken.

‘We have to do more than try,’ Valdor snarls. He has come to join them. Like Dorn, he regards Leetu with deep suspicion. ‘But we’ll have to carry Him. Him and the Angel-son both.’

‘What? Why?’ asks Loken.

‘Coros has contact with the Hegemon,’ says Valdor, ‘but the Hegemon reports it cannot establish a lock on our beacons to effect teleport.’

‘Empyric disruption is still very great, sir,’ says Leetu.

‘I presume so,’ Valdor replies. ‘I will give them another three minutes. If no viable transport lock is established by then, we

will carry them to the nearest embarkation deck.'

'Embarkation deck three is closest,' says Loken.

'Indeed,' says Valdor. 'Embarkation three, then. I imagine you know this ship better than any of us.'

The comment is barbed, and Loken winces. He knows that the stain of his father's curse will never be forgotten, and that to be the son of Horus will never be forgiven, no matter what.

Valdor turns away.

'Coros!' he yells.

'Still awaiting lock, my captain,' Coros reports.

'Three minutes, Coros! Tell them that! The rest of you, make a frame to support Him! Hurry!'

Loken bends down again to listen for breath. It is there, but it is so slight now. The crunch of broken glass in a leather bag.

When he looks up, he sees Leetu picking around in the debris scattered across the deck nearby.

'What are you doing?' Loken snaps.

'If He's alive,' says Leetu, 'if there is still hope, then He would tell us what to do. He's done that all along.'

'He can't speak, you idiot,' Valdor says, overhearing and turning back to look at them.

'I know, sir,' Leetu replies. He bends down to retrieve something. 'But He'd show us. If there was a chance, He'd find a way to show us. That's what He does.'

Leetu holds out the object he has picked up off the deck. It is a tarot card, *The Knight of Mandatio*. It is scorched.

'Tarot?' Valdor says scornfully.

'Wait,' says Leetu. 'There are others.'

He starts to retrieve more, picking them out of the scree of broken glassaic and plastek, and the scraps of ceramite. Cards

from the Emperor's Imperial Tarot, lost and scattered during the battle.

'Look, here,' he says, 'here is *The Space Marine*, and here *The Lantern*. Here, *The Guardsman*, torn in two–'

'Enough of that!' says Valdor.

'No,' says Leetu. '*The Throne*. And this one, *The World*.'

There are others too. Cards from a different deck. *The Orphan* and *The Revenger*. *The Despoiler*. Leetu doesn't say their names. He knows whose deck they came from.

'Stop that!' Valdor warns. 'So help me, the King-of-Ages is dying, and you play with cards–'

'He would show us!' Leetu replies, turning to him. 'If there was a way, He would show us! And these cards are all that's left!'

'So what do they tell you, then?' Valdor sneers.

Leetu looks at the cards he has found. There is no sense to them. If there is a reading here at all, it is poor and incomprehensible.

'I don't know,' he says.

'Then damn you!' says Valdor. 'Damn you.'

Leetu nods. The captain-general is right. It was a foolish idea. When the warp was upon them, the magic of farsight and the arcana made sense and functioned. But the magic has gone away, and there is nothing left but the cold and the dead metal, where such mystic insight has no power. The cards in his hand are just torn, scorched wafers. They have no meaning.

Which means the Emperor is silent. He's no longer talking to anyone, in any way. He is too far gone.

Dorn has returned, his face set grim. He is carrying something wrapped in a bundle of cloth. He calls over one of the Blood Angels, and instructs him to carry it with all reverence.

‘He was right,’ Dorn says to Loken and Valdor. ‘That man LE Two. He was quite correct. It was a shrine. An awful place. And Ferrus was there.’

‘Right about something, then,’ sneers Valdor. ‘He had some notion about cards.’

‘Cards?’ asks Dorn.

‘Tarot cards, seventh son. He thought the King-of-Ages would speak to us and show us how we might best achieve His salvation.’

‘My father set much store by the tarot, Constantin,’ says Dorn. ‘So did Malcador. You know this.’

‘I know Malcador is gone,’ says Valdor bluntly. ‘No Sigillite magic will save us.’

‘We have no signal lock?’ Dorn asks.

‘None. Too much disruption. They cannot fix us.’ Valdor sighs. ‘The three minutes are up!’ he shouts. ‘Prepare to lift them both!’

His Sentinels have secured two deck plates end to end, using one of the Blood Angels’ meltas to fuse the overlap. They bring the makeshift bier over and begin to gently slide the Emperor’s body onto it.

‘Hurry!’ Valdor orders. ‘Carefully,’ he adds.

Leetu has found another card. It is lying in the dust beside Caecaltus’ charred remains.

‘You are a student of the arcana, then, LE Two?’

Leetu looks up. Dorn is standing over him.

‘I believe they mean something, my lord,’ he replies. ‘What exactly, is always open to interpretation. It matters where the spread falls, and where they lie.’

‘And where did these cards fall?’ Dorn asks.

‘You are a student too?’ Leetu asks.

Dorn shakes his head.

‘No, never,’ he says. ‘I don’t like them, and have never held with them. But Malcador, the Regent, he showed me things in the cards. This was… a while ago now. He showed me things that have since come true. I do not like them, LE Two, but I can’t ignore them. Where did these cards fall?’

Leetu holds one out.

‘This one was closest to your father,’ he says. ‘It was right beside Him. I’m sorry. His… His blood is on it.’

Dorn takes the card and studies it. *The Throne*.

He laughs bleakly.

‘So he speaks to us after all,’ he says. ‘These were his cards. And this is where he wants to go. It never occurred to me. I could not think how we could heal him, for his wounds are beyond repair. But the Throne, LE Two. The power of that Throne. It would sustain him, and fortify him. He could draw strength from the warp and restore his aspect. What else was there?’

‘Several others,’ says Leetu, ‘but this was the last. It was lodged here, beside the body of His proconsul, who never left His side. So we might suppose the two cards should be placed side by side and read together.’

‘Revelation,’ says Dorn, looking at the last card. ‘They go together indeed. And we have need of revelation now, for the world is blind to us and cannot find us.’

He stoops down.

‘You found it here?’ he asks.

‘Just here, my lord.’

Dorn looks at the body. It is so burned away, it is hard to tell it was ever a human figure. Just a few fragments of plate remain, caked in ash. The chestplate, the most substantial and durable part of the Aquilon wargear, is the only thing intact.

‘He stood by Him to the end,’ says Leetu. ‘He faced the Lupercal and–’

‘He stood by him all his life,’ says Dorn. ‘Caecaltus Dusk. At the foot of the Throne, day after day–’

He halts.

‘My lord?’ Leetu asks.

Dorn has reached out. He brushes his hand across the chestplate, wiping the ash and soot away.

‘He was there,’ says Dorn, ‘when Malcador took the Throne. I remember it now. Malcador stumbled, and then, on the steps, he stopped and–’

‘And what, my lord?’

Do not fail him. Bring him back to this seat, you hear me? Bring him back alive. You do all you do for him, but do this for me.

‘Look,’ says Dorn. Where he has rubbed away the ash, a mark is revealed, a sigil, drawn quickly, with a fingertip.

This is what will happen, and with my hand I signify it. It cannot be undone.

The hasty sigil is barely visible, yet the lines seem to tremble with light.

‘Teleport lock established!’ Coros calls out behind them.

‘They have our beacons at last?’ Valdor cries.

‘They have something, my captain,’ Coros replies. ‘They are preparing for mass displacement transfer.’

‘Bring them here,’ Dorn shouts out, getting up. ‘Both of them! Bring them close to this point!’

Raldoron and his Blood Angels lift Sanguinius’ body, and bear it over to where Dorn stands with Leetu. Valdor hesitates for a moment, then he and his Sentinels raise the Emperor on their shoulders and carry Him to Dorn’s side as gently as they can.

The air is starting to shimmer. A vortex of wind begins to ripple around them, turning like the birth of a dust devil, lifting

grit and fragments from the deck. The unmistakable ozone stink of a teleport flare begins to fill the chamber.

The light wobbles and bends. It grows brighter.

‘Loken!’ Dorn yells. ‘Loken, come on!’

Loken is hunched beside his father’s body. He looks over at Dorn.

‘Someone must watch over him, my lord,’ he says. ‘Someone must stand vigil here.’

‘Loken!’

‘He was Horus Lupercal,’ says Loken. ‘And he was my father. I am the only one left who cares.’

He stands. He makes the sign of the aquila and holds it in salute until the bang of the teleport flare begins to fade.

They are gone. The wind drops, sparks of decorporealisation drift like fireflies, and the transmaterial dust begins to settle.

Loken kneels beside his father’s corpse. He places his hand on his father’s shoulder. Now there is no one left to see, he weeps.

10:xx

The Throne

Thus is my friend returned to me.

This… this was the plan I made, and thus it is accomplished, but not in the way that I imagined, or the way any of us imagined.

Plans are the delusion of man. We make them to feel safe, and to secure the future. But the future is a shapeshifter, a fluid trickster. It is mercurial and ever-changing, and it wears many aspects. It can be whatever it decides to be, and no plan can fix it or pin it down. It mocks the plans we paint upon its walls, for those walls will not stand forever, and may not be there tomorrow. I know this. I have seen the future, and it has seen us.

Plans cannot be trusted. We place such faith in them, but they are fragile, devious things that alter the moment we look away, or break like oaths, or melt like snow. Some are simply the lies we tell ourselves, or promises we cannot keep, or dreams we hope will see us through the night. Those few that last, and come to fruition, seldom do so in the ways we expect.

Yet, still, we make them. We have always made them, and those that come after me, I'm sure, will continue to do so. They are all we have, our only armour, stronger than war plate. My friend knows this. He has known it from the very beginning. So he has made them anyway, plan after plan, down through the ages that he has ruled as king, not because he is stubborn, or a fool, but because he knows they are the best we can do. The trick, and there is always a trick, is to expect them to fail. To anticipate the way the future will squirm to escape them, to compensate, to build contingencies, to make not one plan, but many, and layer them up, thick and

overlapping, so that when one fails, there is always another. Like war plate indeed. And, like war plate, a blade will always find its way through all those layers if it really wants to. The future's blade is very sharp.

My friend made many plans, and the blade has passed through almost every single one of them.

My last plan, so hasty and impulsive, has worked. It has brought him back. But it has failed too, for it has not brought him back safe and whole. I see this the moment they escort him in. I see it from the fact that they are having to carry him in. There, Rogal and Constantin, and four fine Sentinels, bearing him upon their shoulders. They are weeping. Of course they are. A silence falls upon the throne room. Vulkan starts forward to meet them from the foot of the dais, and at his side, Uzkarel and the other Custodians leave their place to help carry their lord.

This is a time of grief, but I am glad I am here to see it. My last bequest is fulfilled, however imperfectly. I am not alive to witness it, but I am present at least. My whole self burned away hours ago, and even the sigil of me that remained is all but erased. But it has persisted this long. The material man may perish, but the informational man lasts a little longer. Some parts of me will last for years to come, I think, as ideas in the minds of my chosen few.

That's my plan at least.

I have lasted this long because I had to. Not to see him home, but to hold the throne until he returned. As they bring him up the steps towards me, I feel their urgent expectation. The throne is his only chance. It will save him. It will restore him and sustain him. This is what they have understood from the signs and symbols that both he and I have tried to show them, for signs and symbols are the only language we have left. This will save him.

Like plans, though, symbols are imprecise. They are fluid, and they seldom mean what we presume they mean. Rogal and

Constantin believe they are saving him. They think that the throne is his only chance.

In fact, the reverse is also true. He is the throne's only chance.

I know it, and my friend knows it. This is what we were trying to tell them. Yes, the throne may stabilise him and suspend him, as it did me, but that's beside the point. He is the only one who can stabilise it, for I can no longer perform that task. And thus it will tether him here, to this seat, to this room, to this reality, on the brink of death and the verge of life, both wounded and whole, unborn and yet reborn, ended yet unending, now and forever.

It was never his intended plan. But it was a contingency. My King-of-Ages knew it might come to this, if the permutations of the future aligned in this particular way. That's what he told me, anyway. He had me believe he would be ready, if there was no other choice. And I see none from where I am sitting.

It will be agony. I can vouch for that. I have tasted but a brief moment of that eternity, and that is more than enough.

May your death live forever, my friend. There is nothing immortal about this.

And so they come. They ascend the steps. None of them speak, but I feel the hope in their minds. What they do now, they do only for his salvation.

I want to correct them. I want to explain their mistake. But I can't. And even if I could, perhaps I wouldn't. The truth is brutal. At least, this way, they have some solace. Some small consolation in the face of tragedy.

They should have that much. They need to be strong for what lies ahead. This is where it will end, here in my flames. But it is also where it will begin. After a fire, all that is left are foundations. It is a good time to rebuild.

They are our foundations now.

I wonder if they have learned enough. They are close now, Rogal and Vulkan stepping forwards while, behind them, Constantin, Coros, Uzkarel and Lamora lower the bier. Oh, Vulkan, my boy. I have been glad of your company in my last hours, and humbled by your devotion. And you, Rogal. My heart breaks to see the tears in your eyes. I never thought I'd live to see that.

I suppose I haven't.

I hope you have seen enough, Rogal. I hope you have seen enough to learn, you, the master planner. Plans do not work or last. You have to learn to change them as you go. Change them, all the time, make new ones, make better ones, make them strong and layer them deep, but make them flexible. They never work the way you think they're going to.

Not even this one.

Does he understand? He doesn't hear me. He and Vulkan reach down to lift me from this seat. And–

–and I no longer sit upon the throne of Terra.

And this, at last, is my end and my death. For a moment, finally, I feel something–

–it's time.

FRAGMENTS

(AGONAL)

i

After

And after the flame and the wind, and after the steel and the rain, after the banners and the baying horns, after the firelight on shouting faces and the sundering of stone, ten thousand new years begin.

They begin in a silence that falls like a shroud, and settles like dust. They begin in the smoking shell of a city that once crowned the top of the world. They begin on a wounded planet that circles a damaged sun on the stabbed flank of the galaxy. They begin on the endless tracts of waste and rubble that war has left behind, and they will take root and sprout there, and thrive like the weeds and wildflowers that will flourish across those fields long before the debris can be cleared, binding old bones and broken plate, climbing the skirts of rusted tanks, garlanding the heads of silent engines, robing the sleeping dead, and budding shoots from the sockets of their skulls.

The silence is eerie. The sky is yellow, and streaked with smoke from fires that will burn for decades. There is a light behind the clouds in the north. It is not sunrise, or sunset, or a bright and steadfast star. But it lights the northern sky and, beyond the drape of smoke, it lights the worlds above, and the worlds to come, and the numberless zodiacs of the stars.

Some will see it as His light, but it is simpler than that. It is a direction, where once all directions were lost.

The years begin here, in squalls of rain and banks of mournful fog. They begin in the stillness of the open kilometres of flat and glassy mud, the lakes like mirrors, the craters changed to reflective pools. There used to be a city here. There, below, a column of soldiers, toiling across the oozing plain, dragging their old field guns, leaving a long and rutted line behind them in the mire. They are but one of many units, rediscovered now

that the vox is speaking again, recalled for resupply. There is fighting yet to be done.

The air is cold and wet. Marshal Agathe walks beside the long and trudging column of her salvaged army. The guns they drag and lever through the thick mud are heavy, but the shell carts are light enough. In the final hours, they fired almost every shell they had, without respite, to keep the traitor enemy at bay, until the traitor enemy abruptly fell back.

It wasn't their doing. Agathe has been acquainted with war long enough to know that they defeated nothing. That work, that greater work, was done by others, in places far away from the lonely black mansion. All she and her soldiers did was hold death at arm's length.

But they did it well, these men, these nameless or half-named men. They ran those guns with diligence and determination, until the barrels began to glow, and the target line two kilometres away was a constant forest of smoke and flame.

As a commander, she could have wanted better. Better men, better troops, better ordnance. As a soldier, she could not have asked for more.

She sees, ahead of her, the woman, Katerina Moriana. She is travelling back to the Sanctum with them. There is nowhere else to go in this sea of mud. Moriana is talking with the soldiers as they march, amusing them with stories to ease the back-break of their trek. As she catches up with her, Agathe hears her telling, yet again, the story of the lone guardsman. An inspirational anecdote, and surely made up. A lone guardsman, just like them, very ordinary, nothing special. He had nothing but his rifle and his loyalty. But he stood with the Emperor. Right at the Emperor's side. He faced Horus, personally. Yes, face to face, to look him in the eye. He kept the evil of Lupercal at bay for a few short seconds, just long enough to buy the Emperor a moment in which He could win the day. That's what soldiers do. He died, but he died well. No one lives forever. You do what you can with the moments you have. Yes, he was just like you.

‘His name was Ollanius,’ she hears the woman say.

‘Telling stories again?’ Agathe asks as she falls in step with her. The woman looks at her, that odd tilt of the head. She smiles and nods. She has picked up the skirts of her dress to avoid the worst of the squelching mud.

‘Stories help, marshal,’ she replies. ‘Words heal. You can close a wound with a good story, and let it mend, and make it better.’

‘Even when it’s a lie?’ asks Agathe.

‘Lies are more efficacious still,’ Moriana smiles. ‘A good lie is better than a bad truth. Their healing powers are miraculous. Tell a good story, and you can restore things to the way they were. Tell a good lie, and you make them the way they should have been. These soldiers deserve some consolation. They are good men.’

‘They are,’ Agathe agrees.

‘They are fearful, though.’

‘Fearful?’

‘They are afraid of what will happen to them when they get back to the Palace,’ says Moriana. ‘They were convicts, all of them. Technically, they are wanted men. They are afraid that it will be discovered they are not real soldiers.’

‘They are real soldiers,’ Agathe replies.

‘Yes, in the ways that count,’ Moriana replies. ‘But you know what I mean. They fear discovery. They fear someone finding out that they are not what they pretend to be.’

‘They told you this?’ Agathe asks.

Moriana laughs. ‘No,’ she says. ‘But their minds have no hiding places.’

‘I see.’

They walk a little further in silence.

‘That is a very good idea,’ says Moriana.

Agathe looks at her sharply.

‘My apologies,’ Moriana smiles. ‘I didn’t mean to pry.’

‘My mind has no hiding places either?’

‘It’s not that, marshal. The thought is right there in the forefront of your mind and hard to miss. You’ve been thinking about it for a while. You’ve been waiting to ask me.’

‘Then imagine I’m asking you now, Katerina Moriana.’

‘Well,’ Moriana replies. ‘I think it’s entirely appropriate. When we get back, there will be great confusion. Confusion that will last for years, I’m sure. Considerable stocks of data will have been destroyed. I suppose, therefore, it would be quite easy for your adjutant, Phikes, to have lost all the records regarding this unit. The confusion of war, and all that. And someone bearing the seal and authority of the Praetorian could verify the identity of this regiment without anybody questioning it. They are the Four Hundred and Third Exigency Stratiotes, and so that’s what they will be.’

‘That’s a yes, then?’ Agathe asks.

‘Yes,’ says Moriana. ‘In the months, perhaps years, ahead of us, the Praetorian will need all the good men he can get. This war is over, but the next awaits. I don’t think he will ever question where those good men came from.’

‘Is this…’ Agathe says. ‘Can I ask you, is this typical of your behaviour? Do stories and lies come naturally to you?’

‘I serve the truth,’ Moriana replies.

‘Yes, but are you good at hiding things? Are you good at keeping secrets?’

‘Ah now,’ says Moriana with a smile. ‘That would be telling.’

Agathe nods. She moves ahead, at a brisker pace. Behind her, she hears the woman laugh and engage another gun-team with one of her stories. Agathe doesn’t wait to hear it. She goes to find Phikes.

The years begin everywhere. They begin with the first divisions of exhausted warriors moving out from the Sanctum's broken gates to reinforce those who have never left the field, but who have turned certain defeat into pursuit. They begin with the hounding and the purging of the enemy multitude as it tries, in its horror and despair, to flee the Throneworld and find some shelter where it can lick its wounds, and calculate its losses, and begin to understand fate's cruel reversal.

They begin in the Dominions and fringes of the Palace, and out across every continent of the planet, where wars of vengeance and escape ignite in the aftermath of the siege. To most, these wars seem to be just a continuation of the conflict, but they are not. They are a different breed entirely. The mettle and temper of them has changed, like the blade of a sword drawn back into the furnace-heat to be refashioned. Concepts of conquest and defiance, which once gripped the world like talons, are spent, and in their place come vengeance and fear, righteous anger and desperation, vindication and hubris. These will be the wars of liberation, but they will also be the wars of succession, perhaps on both sides. Before it has even been declared, a scouring has begun.

They begin in the low skies and the orbital spaces, they begin between the circuits of Terra and Luna. They begin as the avenging fleets of Admiral Su-Kassen and Roboute Guilliman descend like a fire from heaven and lance into the ship-lines and formations of the traitor fleets as they attempt to take flight. They begin as an inferno in the void, with ships engaging close, all guns brought to bear, while others tumble from the sky like burning leaves. They begin with the thunder of the *Phalanx*'s main batteries. They begin as that thunder peals out across the Solar Realm, and the void war multiplies and magnifies.

They begin in the battered Rotunda as Sandrine Icaro calls her War Court to order and, with her systems renewed and operational, freed from the spit and crackle of the warp, she commences the direction of a war of repulsion and execution.

They begin with grief.

They begin with warriors who have lost their reason and their way, who were once gods and are now men again, and who cannot begin to fathom the loss of the powers they commanded. Chaos has withdrawn its gifts, and the strength with which it blessed them. They lament. They grieve. They howl. They rage. They do not understand why their gods have abandoned them. They yearn for the certainty they have lost, and the cause that united them in their fury. It seemed so certain. It seemed so clear. Victory seemed so secure.

Wracked by that grief, they fight. Not for Horus. Not for the Old Four. Not for the future, or to bring down a hated foe.

They fight for themselves, merely to survive.

They are not alone in grief. At the foot of a golden throne, the last loyal sons of Terra kneel and weep.

But they do not say farewell, or offer eulogy.

For He still lives. He does not die. The Throne will sustain Him, and renew Him, and when His wounds are healed, He will rise again, and stand with them.

ii

Vigil

He kneels before his father and he waits. After all that has been done, despite it all, his father should not be alone. Someone must wait with him until the end comes.

It is coming closer. The air is growing thin and cold, and the creaking groans of the dying ship grow ever louder.

Through the high compartment windows above them, only darkness is visible. The nightscape of space. There are a few specks of light, that might be stars or distant ships, but they are turning fast in a wild and uneven procession. The ship is shifting, uncontrolled, adrift, a broken shell slowly rotating in an orbital decay. There is no way to tell what its final fate will be. From the sounds of shearing collapse and structural failure, Loken suspects the *Vengeful Spirit* will soon suffer a critical loss of integrity and break up. But it may burn up before that, caught in Terra's gravity, and dragged down to a fiery, stratospheric demise. Whole, or in a million fragments, it will light up the skies of the Throneworld like a meteor shower or a doomed comet.

'I feel the hand of the ship upon me,' Loken says. 'You know that expression, father? Of course. You will have heard it many times. There was always that bond between us all. I miss those days. That's why I stood where I stood. I make no apologies, and expect no forgiveness from you. But I stood where I stood to fight for what we used to have. It was a fine thing. The finest. It should never have been lost. So I fought for it. I fought for you.'

He looks at his father. Darkness gazes back from empty pits.

'It's true,' Loken says. 'I fought for you. Am I not a Luna Wolf? I fought for you, for the you that used to be. The father I loved, not the thing you became. I fought to get you back. I

don’t know if you became what you became willingly, or if it was forced upon you. A little of both, I fear. I mean no recrimination. I have seen the other side of this world now. Like you, I have looked into eternity. I know that Chaos merely takes what we already are and uses us. You, father, you were strong, you were proud, and you were fierce. So that’s what it made from you. And no, I do not think I am better than you because I resisted where you did not. Father, the Old Four never came for me the way they came for you. You were Warmaster. You were always the prize worth stealing. So I fought for you, which meant I fought against you. I kept the oaths you broke. I fought to bring you back. I was fighting for you all along.’

He sighs.

‘And you did come back, didn’t you? Just for a moment. Just for a second. You saw it all, just like me. So… you understand. The old you, I mean. For that at least, I am thankful.’

A shudder runs through the deck, the most violent yet. There is a distant thump. Loken rises to his feet.

‘I do not think it will be long now,’ he says. ‘Not long at all. We can go together. I have nothing left to fight for, and you shouldn’t go alone.’

Another deep thump. A muffled, grinding whir. Loken sways as the deck tilts. In the hallway outside the chamber, there is a flash, and then another. Power, surging fitfully, lighting the passageway lamps and then shutting down again. The lamps go on, then off, then on.

Light shines in through the hatchway and shafts across the deck. Three figures step out of the light and into the chamber.

‘He’s dead,’ says Loken. ‘There’s nothing left.’

Abaddon stares at him. His war plate is gouged and cracked, and his cheek is caked in dried blood. His sword hangs in his hand. His eyes are sunken and lost, his cheeks drawn, his skin pale and feverish. He looks exhausted and famished, as though stricken by some wasting disease.

‘Dead,’ he echoes.

Loken nods.

‘Why are you here, Loken?’ Abaddon asks.

‘I stayed with him,’ says Loken. ‘He was alone.’

‘Not any more,’ whispers Sycar. The Master of the Justaerin is edging out to the left of Abaddon, and Baraxa is moving out to Abaddon’s right. They intend to encircle him. Abaddon is simply gazing at his father’s corpse.

‘No, not any more, Hellas,’ says Loken. ‘His sons are with him. I think he would be grateful for that.’

‘His sons, eh?’ Sycar rumbles.

‘Yes,’ says Loken. ‘Do you intend to fight me, Sycar? More blood, after all that’s been spent?’

‘Your blood,’ says Sycar. He has circled around almost to Loken’s right flank, and Baraxa is now on his left.

‘We’ll see, if we have to,’ says Loken. The Master of the Justaerin sees the look in Loken’s eyes.

‘This traitor should not be here,’ Sycar says to Abaddon.

‘Traitor?’ says Loken. He smiles. ‘Really? From your lips, Sycar?’

‘You know what you are,’ says Baraxa.

‘I do,’ says Loken. ‘I absolutely do, Azelas. Do you?’

Sycar begins his move, a telltale hum of his Terminator plate as it powers for a lunge.

‘Stop,’ says Abaddon.

‘But–’

‘Stop, Sycar. I said stop. You too, Baraxa. Just… stop.’

Baraxa lowers his blade, frowning. Sycar glares at the First Captain, and then takes a step back.

‘You want me for yourself, then, Ezekyle?’ Loken says.

Abaddon draws breath, and takes a pace forward. Face to face, they stare at each other.

Abaddon shakes his head.

‘No,’ he says. ‘No more killing. No more of it, Loken. There are far too few of us to turn on each other again.’

‘I agree,’ says Loken.

Abaddon isn’t really looking at him any more. His gaze is fixed on his father’s corpse.

‘You waited here?’ he asks.

‘As I said,’ says Loken.

‘Yes, of course,’ says Abaddon. He moves past Loken, and kneels. He gently places his hand on his father’s body. ‘That was the right thing to do. The respectful thing. A fine warrior is owed that, no matter what.’

He shakes his head. He withdraws his hand.

‘Horus was a fool,’ he says. ‘Our father was a fool.’

‘He was a puppet, Ezekyle,’ says Loken. ‘He was made a puppet. Chaos chose him, and used him, and discarded him.’

‘Discarded him?’

‘Yes, in the end.’

‘Because he wasn’t enough?’ asks Abaddon.

‘Because he was too much,’ says Loken. ‘He was the most terrible thing, Ezekyle. He was absolute and everything. But he was also Horus. He didn’t want gifts and tributes. He didn’t want to be a puppet, or some pawn of the Old Four. He wanted to rule. He wanted control.’

‘Control?’ Abaddon replies sharply. He looks at Loken. ‘Control?’

Loken nods. ‘It was the one thing they wouldn’t give him. Power, yes, but the authority to use that power, no. He was just a weapon to them. A weapon to kill the one thing that threatened them. A weapon to end the human race. They were

never going to let us live. They were never going to let him rule anything.'

'And you know this how?' asks Sycar.

'I was there,' says Loken.

Abaddon rises to his feet.

'Then he was a fool,' he says. 'He was a fool to have believed otherwise. I warned him. I feared for him. I tried to make him see sense. He wouldn't listen.'

'He was Horus Lupercal,' says Loken. 'I loved him, Ezekyle, but it was never easy to tell him things when his mind was set. And he had not set his mind himself. He was no fool, but he was played for one.'

Abaddon makes no reply.

'Do not make the same mistake, Ezekyle,' says Loken.

'I will not,' says Abaddon quietly. 'I will not be made a fool. That is never going to happen to me.'

Abaddon turns to him. He clears his throat.

'I believed in the Imperium, and it betrayed me,' he says. 'I believed in my father, and he disappointed me. I will never be beholden to anything or anyone again. I will follow no one, no primarch, no daemon. I will lead.'

'Then lead wisely,' says Loken. 'And I ask you, Ezekyle… lead what?'

Abaddon stares at Loken for a second.

'I have the authority now, Loken,' he says. 'As First Captain, I am the heir to command. Do you oppose that?'

'No,' says Loken.

'We are trying to right the ship,' says Abaddon. 'To make some running repairs and restart the drives.'

'That won't be easy. The damage is severe.'

‘Indeed. Not easy at all. But the *Vengeful Spirit* has always been a resolute vessel. Strong, enduring. We have made a start. We will see how far we get.’

‘That’s your plan?’ asks Loken.

‘Would you advise differently?’ Abaddon asks.

‘I would advise surrender,’ says Loken. He hears Sycar snort.

‘We don’t surrender, Loken,’ says Abaddon.

‘No,’ says Loken. ‘But a coming to terms would be the best conclusion. There’s nowhere to run, not in a wounded ship, and the forces that are coming for you are fired with vengeance. This war will persist until the galaxy ends, unless one side lowers its guard. Chaos is fled. It’s gone. There will be others like you, Ezekyle. Others of your cause who regret their actions, or who were misled and duped, or who have simply seen the error of their ways. But if the First Captain of the Sixteenth sets an example, they would follow you.’

‘Guilliman will kill us,’ says Baraxa.

‘Guilliman wants the Imperium restored,’ says Loken. ‘He wants it whole again. I believe, if the terms were right, he would accept the return of Astartes brothers, and spare them. He doesn’t want to lose nine Legions. There was a mistake born of misunderstanding. Not all of your side are beyond redemption. So set an example. Begin the process. Bring others with you, and demonstrate your contrition.’

‘It’s too late for that,’ snaps Sycar.

‘It’s better that,’ says Loken, ‘than the alternative. A crusade to hunt you all down, to exterminate you all, to scour you from the stars. This civil war perpetuated under a new name. No mercy. No quarter. No forgiveness. Where would you even begin to run?’

‘I’ll think of somewhere,’ Abaddon replies.

‘Ezekyle–’

‘Azelas is right, Loken,’ Abaddon says. ‘Guilliman will kill us. He will never forgive what we have done. He will never accept that we were right, and our grievances justified.’

‘Guilliman wasn’t here,’ says Loken. ‘But Dorn was. He understands it better. He might listen. And he is the Praetorian, after all. Ezekyle, if you are prepared to commit to this course, truly prepared, I would go to him. I would speak to Dorn on behalf of the Sixteenth. I would make your case and negotiate terms. I mean it. I will swear an oath to it, if you want me to. He would listen to me. I know it.’

‘You would do that?’ Abaddon asks.

‘I’d do it for my Legion, and for the honour it once had. I would do it for our father as he was before this darkness fell.’

Loken stares down at the corpse.

‘And I think he would want me to,’ he says. ‘My life for Lupercal. I can’t give it to him now, but I can give it to his memory.’

Abaddon is silent for a moment.

‘And if I decide to reject your offer?’ he asks. ‘If I decide to fight on? Will you oppose me?’

‘I’m not in a position to, Ezekyle. Will you kill me?’

‘No, Garviel. No, I won’t. I can use all the brothers I can get.’

‘I won’t fight for you,’ Loken says. ‘And I won’t run with you. But I will come after you, at your heels, and remind you, every hour of every day, that my offer still stands.’

‘Some Mournival…’ Abaddon murmurs.

‘So?’ Loken asks.

‘You were always the idealist, Loken. Always. I was the pragmatist. The Legions built the Imperium, through blood and sacrifice, and the Emperor would have discarded us. He would have cut our throats to make way for the human ascendancy. They would have no Imperium but for us! The betrayal is unconscionable, and our outrage burns as bright as

ever. I'm… sorry. This is a time for pragmatism. We're going to run. Fight for our birthright. Fight for what is owed us. Fight for our lives, if we have to. That's the way it is. My decision. You can come with us. Or you can go. I won't stop you.'

Loken sighs. He starts to speak.

Blood comes out of his mouth in place of words.

Eyes wide, he falls forward into Abaddon. Abaddon catches him, and lowers him in horror to the deck.

'What did you do?' Abaddon snarls.

Erebus slides his athame out of Loken's back, and whips blood from the blade with a flick of his wrist.

'He opposed you from the start,' says Erebus. 'He wasn't about to stop. He was a traitor to your Legion.'

Abaddon rises. His sword comes up and jabs against the Word Bearer's throat. Erebus does not flinch.

'What. Did. You. Do?' Abaddon spits.

'He stood against you, Abaddon,' Erebus says. 'What do you not understand about that? He would have killed you all, the moment the chance arose. Killed you, or betrayed you. Besides, he had to die.'

'What do you mean?'

'He had to. He had to. To close the circle, and complete the cycle.' Erebus smiles. 'We have lost today,' he says. 'Horus has failed. But this isn't the end. There will be other opportunities to do it, and do it better. We will learn from our mistakes. We will be stronger. We will be far greater than this. If it takes a thousand years, or ten thousand, we will triumph. And to do that, we need guidance. Do you know how daemons are born?'

'Why would I know that?' Abaddon growls.

'It's a thing you should learn,' says Erebus. 'A daemon may die long before it is born. Time is meaningless to them. A

circle, you see? They come back because they never go away. And some of them are great powers of special significance. One of those played a vital role in this. It must exist to do that, just as it must exist to help us in our future efforts. So it had to be born, and this happened to be the moment.'

'Speak sense,' says Abaddon.

'A daemon is born in the warp in response to an event here,' says Erebus. 'A death, for example. Something especially vindictive and abrupt. Something unjust, perhaps. A daemon was just born, Abaddon. You will come to know it well. It will be the footsteps at your back. It will be the one who walks behind you. It will be the only name you hear. Watch for it. Look out. It's already here.'

Loken and Abaddon, reunited.

iii

The remains

The years begin here. They begin with burials and mourning. From the rubble of the city, tombs will be the first things to be built. There will be splendid mausoleums for the mighty and the great, each marked by fine words and noble epitaphs, and mass graves for the unidentified, each marked by lonely cenotaphs and eternal flames. There will be no salute of guns, neither for the great nor the unknown, for the guns have spoken too much already. There will be a new breed of remembrancer, a whole species of them, who will spend their lives remembering other lives, and who will make their deeds the solemn recovery of other deeds. There will be stories, of giants and guardsmen, of demigods and mortals. The immortals have begun to die, but the dead will become immortal.

The years begin here, as the silent Angels of the IX walk the body of their fallen lord to his rest. Flames swirl from the tops of their staves, and they swing the lamps of night. Raldoron leads them, and behind him come Azkaellon and Satel Aimery, Taerwelt Ikasati and Zephon Sorrow-Bringer, Khoradal Furio and Nassir Amit, and five hundred others. Like all of his brothers, Raldoron has dreamed of this hour. None of them will speak of those dreams. They hope that their shame will be interred with the body of their primarch. Their ceremonies are simple. To hymn one single death, even the Great Angel's, when there is not a life in the world untouched by death, would be unseemly.

Sanguinius would not have wished for that.

Purple and amaranthine shrouds drape the statues of the Palace. Lists are made, lists of impossible length. They are made to number the dead, for that is only right, but they are also made to calculate the living who remain, for that number

will be vital in the years just now beginning. The equations of war must be recalculated without delay.

The years begin here, with an elderly man listening to his pocket watch, and discovering that it is running again. Kyril Sindermann winds his pocket watch, but has no idea how to reset the hands. There is time again, but no way of telling what that time is.

He stands on the steps of the library. The air is paper-white with smoke, and every surface is coated in dust and debris. Explosions still thump in the city around him. Light, as strong as sunlight, is strobing and flashing overhead, muffled by the clouds. Mauer says it's a void war. Ships engaging in close orbit. Thousands of ships. She's learned this from the vox.

Sindermann can hear her in the courtyard below, trying to maintain a signal, trying to contact the Prefectus or the Hegemon, trying to gather information. Any information.

They'll be told in time, Sindermann thinks. They'll be told what they need to know. He turns and looks back at the library's scorched facade. From this day on, in the years that are beginning here, on this bleak morning, knowledge will become the most precious thing of all. Who has it. Who does not. What can be learned, and what must be unlearned. Secrets, more than ever, will become currency, and those who get to keep the secrets will be the architects of the Imperium as it is rebuilt.

There are things that mankind must know, and there are things that mankind must never know. Deciding one from another is a task that will rest, he thinks, with a wiser head than his. He does not envy them. He has always upheld the idea that knowledge exists to be shared without discrimination.

He is no longer sure of that. He's no longer sure of anything.

Mauer's calling to him. Sindermann looks back at the archivist, watching him from the doorway of the library.

'Will you come with us?' he asks her. They're going to attempt to get to the Hegemon.

‘I must stay here, sir,’ she replies. ‘The collections can’t be left unattended.’

‘It won’t be safe here,’ he says. ‘It’s probably as dangerous as it was when we arrived. The enemy–’

‘Someone must keep the books safe,’ she says.

He nods. Smiles.

‘We’ll send people to assist you,’ he says. ‘Prefectus probably. I’ll return when I can. So…’

Mauer calls his name again impatiently. He turns to go. Then he looks back, with a rueful grin.

‘I’m so sorry,’ he says. ‘So rude of me. I never once asked you your name.’

‘Chase, sir,’ she replies. ‘It’s Lilean Chase.’

He nods again, and walks down into the courtyard, a handkerchief across his mouth to keep the smoke at bay.

The archivist watches him go, and then closes the door.

Many, too many, will care not what these new years will bring. Emhon Lux lies dead beside his damaged lifter chair beneath the shattered arch of Teclis Gate. He stares up at the sky. From where he lies, the bisected half of the gate’s arch that is still standing looks like a broken wing. His eyes see nothing of the sky, or the arch. He has lost his final battle, not against the traitor foe, who litter the rubble around him, but against his own ruined body, over which his rage and will to fight could not prevail.

His corpse will not be found for eighteen weeks, when the workgangs finally advance into the zone.

Tjaras Grunli is discovered, by chance, by White Scars riders within a few hours of the Emperor’s return. When they lift up his body, respectfully, to carry it away, it finally exhales the breath it has been holding. They hurriedly check him, believing for a second that he is, by some miracle, alive.

He is not.

Jera Talmada lies near the wreckage of her tread out past Irenic.

Her body is never found.

Others try to fathom the nature of these new years just beginning. Constantin Valdor sits alone in his chamber, and stares at his spear, laid out on the floor in front of him. He wonders if the things that it has taught him are lies. He knows they are not.

Leetu waits alone in an anteroom. He is not restrained, but there are interrogations he must submit to, by order of the Praetorian. He takes out his old deck, and slips into them the new cards he gathered from the burned chamber. They come from two other decks entirely. He sorts them, and lays a spread to see if, in their conflicting voices, he can discern some future for himself, or for the world.

He turns the first card. *The Revenger*. That much he knew already.

Zaranchek Xanthus, his wound patched with a field dressing, waits in the laboratoria of the Retreat. Aedile-Marshal Harahel and four other Wardens of the Sodality of the Key, grim and silent, have just removed the last of Fo's work into safekeeping. Xanthus has no idea where they are taking the Terminus Sanction, but the work has been carefully supervised by Khalid Hassan, so the Chosen will maintain close scrutiny. Titan, that's his guess.

He moves the bank of waste incinerators, and checks their settings. He can feel their heat. All are operating at capacity. Another twenty minutes, and they will have cremated all the genetic material that has been cleaned out of the bio-structor vats. That was the deal. Destroy everything now the work is done.

He looks up and finds Amon Tauromachian watching him. The Custodes move so silently.

'Are you finished?' Amon asks.

‘Just another few minutes,’ Xanthus replies. ‘I want to make sure all the materials are purged.’

‘It is time to leave,’ says Amon.

‘Just another few minutes, if you please,’ says Xanthus. ‘I want to make sure everything has been done correctly.’

Amon stares at him, then leaves without a word.

Everything must be checked and double-checked. Nothing must be left behind. The last portion of biomatter placed in the incinerators was the final residue of primary sample group ‘Xanthus’. He loaded it for disposal himself.

The incinerators roar softly, belying the intense heat within. It’s all in there, and not a trace of it will remain when the cycle ends, not a strand of DNA, not a scrap of ash that can be typed.

All of it, including the dismembered body of the original Zaranchek Xanthus.

Xanthus gathers up a few data-slates and a few sheaves of documents, and places them inside a file case. He includes the pages he purloined from the Regent’s notebooks when nobody was looking.

And he adds, carefully, Basilio Fo’s notebooks too, the ones he was allowed to keep during his incarceration (for I will certainly be needing those).

For some, the years wind back, so they will be in the right order when they finally meet the new ones starting here. Erebus, the Dark Apostle, certainly did that with his vicious blade and Loken’s blood. He has completed the circle, just as the Old Four taught him, so that it will turn correctly, and turn forever. The new years will walk beside him.

In a cave, so many years ago it is impossible to count them exactly, John Grammaticus carefully ties the next wolf noose knot the way he was taught. It is summer in the valley outside, a hot sun, a blue sky. The air is fresh, and the forests are thick, an almost emerald green, though it has only been a few

generations since the ice began to retreat. Oak, holly, fir and pine, mantling sharp young mountains. One day, this place will be called the Pyrenees.

He puts the ball of thread back in his satchel. Another loop of thread, correctly placed. There are many more to go, and many more to come. This was his promise, to mark the way, all the way from the end to the very beginning, to set out a path he has already travelled once. That path is far, far longer and more complex now than when he made, or will make, that journey. Time and realspace have been restored to their original positions, so some of the steps on the way are now millennia or light years apart. But he has to mark them all, every one of them, or all is lost, or will be lost, or was lost, long ago, in the far future.

He imagines it will take the rest of his life.

He takes out his torquetum, to gauge the bearings of the next step. Satisfied, he draws a last breath of this cool summer air. He pauses to admire the images marked on the rock wall. Figures of men with spears, an antelope, a handprint. The painting was made in the last day or two. The men who made it will be returning soon, their hunt successful. He's confident they will never notice the little loop of red thread tied to a split in the rock in the dimmest recess of the cave.

Time to go. Time to make his cut. He takes the feather from his bag. Its tip is sharp. Sharp enough. A pure white feather borrowed from an Angel's wing.

iv

The heirs

Ten thousand new years begin here too, on the bridge decks of the *Vengeful Spirit*.

As Ezekyle Abaddon enters, various system alarms and warning klaxons are still sounding, as though they are counting the seconds and marking out a steady pace for the years to follow.

‘Mute them,’ he orders. It takes a few moments to cancel them all. The last of them fade away, leaving only the sounds of activity; the whir of engaging systems, the chime of consoles and auspex plotters, the mutter of voices, the sizzle of heat-torches fusing metal, the creaks and groans of the spavined ship.

Sparks from the repair work drift in the stale air. Abaddon tries to ignore the evidence of damage everywhere. He looks for what is intact, what is whole, what is working. He sees the green and white runes flickering on the steersman positions, the test patterns flickering on the screens at Motive, Sensoria, and Task Dynamics, the ailing amber bars crawling up the displays of Drive Chamber and Principal Engineering. He sees hololithic projections begin to light and take shape.

He ignores his own damage too. He feels cold inside, and leaden in his movements. There is a wound, a rawness, deep within him, as though something vital has been ripped out. There is nothing left to fill that emptiness.

He misses it. He misses the enargeia of the gifts he was allowed to glimpse. He feels incomplete without them. He feels hollow and mortal.

And he hates himself for missing it. The gifts Erebus shared were just devices, weapons, advantages, but he is horrified

how quickly they began to appeal to him. His mind and body, perhaps even his soul, yearn for those intoxicating and seductive possibilities he was permitted to witness.

He knows the others feel the same, Sycar, Baraxa, Ulnok… They all feel the absence too. Others, like Ekron Fal and Tarchese Malabreux seem almost crippled by it, burned out, glassy, shaking, unaware that they are weeping all the time.

Erebus has counselled him. Erebus, who knows so much more about these things than Abaddon does, and who must be suffering his own extreme pain and loss. It's hard to tell. It's hard to know anything about the Dark Apostle, even though truths are written on his very skin. Abaddon loathes him. He loathes him for what he is, what he's done, and all he represents. He's lost count of the times he's come within a hair's breadth of killing Erebus, simply for being Erebus.

But Erebus is useful. He is an instrument and a source of knowledge. He is one of the few hopes they have to get out of this alive. So, while he is useful, Erebus will live, until Abaddon decides otherwise.

Erebus has counselled him. He has counselled all of them, with quiet words and soft reassurances. He has told them how to manage the present pain, and how to use it. He has whispered promises too. The warp has receded, and Chaos withdrawn. But not forever. There are things they can do; first, by means of survival and immediate safety, and then greater things, things that will open a way back to the Old Four, things that will slowly bring them to a place where the gifts might be offered again.

Abaddon sees the Dark Apostle waiting in the shadows at the side of the command level, watching the work. Erebus confided that part of the pain Abaddon feels, part of the pain that afflicts all of the XVI, is simply grief. They have lost their father. They must come to terms with that, or it will cripple them.

Abaddon isn't convinced. His father's life is not what he is grieving.

Abaddon crosses to the old strategium table. Glass and chips of plastek crunch beneath his feet. He lays the Talon of Horus on the tabletop. He wants the claws to be visible to them all. He wants the claws beside him, so it is clear who owns them now.

'Report!' he calls out. The murmurs in the bridge space die down. There are about fifty people present, most of them warriors of the XVI, as well as a few Word Bearers. They are being forced to improvise and adapt. There are very few members of the ship's crew left alive, and most of them are next to useless. But Astartes are trained and drilled to function in any role an emergency demands. They can draw on hypno-planted reserves of knowledge and technique, and serve in extremis as steersmen, as sensoria, as drive-chamber adepts. They are Astartes, born and bred to be effective under any circumstances. Stars do not get conquered or brought to compliance by men who cannot excel in any capacity when the need arises.

And these are the Sons of Horus. Broken, wounded, hurting, yes, but still the finest transhuman champions the Imperium has ever produced.

'Drive power reported at sixteen per cent,' Argonis reports, approaching with a data-slate in his hand. He is pale, his wounds hastily patched, and there is a tremor in him that Abaddon doesn't like. But Argonis is nevertheless trying to function, just like the rest of them.

'Lateral is still refusing to respond,' Argonis says. 'We have restored some servitor function, and work has commenced to reinforce subframe structure at nine-six and nine-twelve. No power on the lower decks, and I've shut it down on intermediary as well, air-circ, environmental, and grav too in places, to conserve what we have and redirect to main dynamic function.'

Abaddon studies the data-slate.

'Impellers?' he asks.

‘Lit, but rotation is slow.’

‘Arrays?’

‘Baraxa reports we should have operative function in a few minutes.’

‘Make it less than a few,’ says Abaddon. The light in the bridge space is harsh blue, and there is a background whine of ultrasonics. ‘Shut down the decontam system. It’s wasting power we can use elsewhere.’

Argonis seems about to question this. Then he nods.

‘Yes, First Captain.’

‘We need to move, Argonis,’ says Abaddon. ‘As soon as we have functional helm response and impellers. If we sit here much longer…’

Argonis nods again. Ulnok approaches.

‘We have now embarked sixty-four vessels from the surface, First Captain,’ Ulnok reports. ‘We have more inbound. Vorus Ikari and Taras Balt report their companies in lift, and are about sixty minutes out. Xhofar Beruddin reports Fifth Company is under heavy fire, but projects extraction beginning within thirty minutes.’

‘We’ll wait as long as we can,’ says Abaddon. He knows he needs them all. As many men as can be brought off the Throneworld as possible.

‘Yes, First Captain.’

‘But inform them that we cannot stay on station forever.’

‘They understand that, First Captain.’

‘Make it explicit, please, Ulnok.’

A siren starts to blare.

‘I told you to mute those!’ Abaddon barks.

‘It’s a grid response,’ Sycar calls out. ‘We have sensoria contact. Five ships closing to bear, six thousand kilometres out.’

‘Ident?’ Abaddon calls.

‘Saturnine Fleet.’

Abaddon has been watching the displays the whole time. Throneworld near-space is a churning, burning mess of void war. Thousands of ships, and more arriving all the time. He’s seen whole flotillas of the host fleet scorched out of orbit already, overhauled and exterminated as they try to break and flee. The vengeance is as savage as expected. No quarter. None at all.

‘I want a weapon system overview immediately!’ Abaddon orders. They need to run. They need to run before they are found and killed. But they are barely at functional power, and there are still hundreds of their brothers racing from the surface to reach them.

Besides, Abaddon’s not yet sure the flagship can even move.

‘Hard contact now,’ Sycar growls. ‘Inbound vessels have full sensor lock. They will have firing solutions within thirty seconds.’

‘Power?’ Abaddon asks curtly.

‘Now at nineteen per cent,’ Argonis replies. Abaddon nods.

‘Shields up,’ he says.

V

Lux in tenebris

He walks her as far as he can. Perhaps a little further. He's risking reprimand even bringing her here, but he doesn't seem to care.

Or perhaps he cares more than he should.

She's never been this far inside the Sanctum Imperialis. Their progress is slow, partly because she is so frail, but mostly because she keeps stopping to look around in wonder.

Despite the ruination everywhere, the Palace seems to delight her. She doesn't seem to see the debris and dirt, the shattered glassaic, the cracked tiles, the shot-holes cratering the golden walls, the blood. She gazed up in awe at the Eternity Gate as they walked through the dust beneath it, as though it was still a towering monument, a glittering arch of triumph and glory.

Even in ruin, the top of it gone, it was majestic. It dwarfed them both. It dwarfed the people streaming in and out, and the hobbled war engines limping past them into the daylight like wounded beasts.

The air is glazed with smoke. The darkness is everywhere, deep and oppressive, but the gold and auramite still gleams. It catches the firelight, the remains of ruins burning, or the flames of torches carried by the men-at-arms and the hurrying medicae. It reflects too the flash and burn of the sky, the drizzle and flare of lights above the clouds, like some aurora display.

'That's the void war,' he tells her. She doesn't need to know the rest. She can imagine it. Fleets of ships ripping through fleets of ships in the orbital zone.

He knows the way. He's been here before, and he's allowed to be here. The people they pass, and there are so many of

them, all dirty, all stiff with shock and confusion, all rushing to perform vital errands, bow their heads to him when they see his black-and-white plate, even fellow Astartes in red and white and yellow.

But she feels like she knows the way too. It's as though the Via Aquila has led her all the way here, and continues to run out before her, as far as she can see, leading her on.

They stop in a soaring chamber where two processionals cross. The roof has partly collapsed, and plasteel beams slope in, like giant fingers, roped with strands of broken cable. There are statues here, the golden images of other champions and other heroes. Some have been toppled from their plinths. The walls, caked in soot, are a huge frieze of demigods and angels, attending a figure on a throne. She can't see the face of the figure, because of the damage, but she can see the halo of light that surrounds it like sun rays, conveying its steadfast aspect of majesty.

'We can't go any further,' he says.

'How far? How far is the rest of the way?' she asks.

'From here, the Silver Door is about five kilometres,' he replies.

Close enough. She never thought to get even this far.

'Thank you for bringing me here,' she says.

Sigismund nods. 'Thank you for bringing me here,' he replies.

He looks at her. Keeler seems so thin and fragile. The robes that bundle her don't disguise how slender and drawn she is, they seem to make it more obvious. Her face is pinched, her skin almost translucent. So very few of the pilgrimage, less than a fifth, left the mountain alive, and most of those that did are fundamentally changed.

But her eyes are bright.

She leans on his arm for a second, catching her breath. Then she slowly turns in a circle, gazing at the walls around her.

‘What will you do now?’ Sigismund asks.

‘The same as you, I think,’ she replies. ‘The same as everyone. Hope, strive, heal.’

She glances at him.

‘Believe,’ she adds.

Her smile is far stronger than the rest of her. It seems to hold her up. It’s a flash of the young woman she used to be, and it speaks to the strength she carries inside. A light from somewhere else. A strength of understanding, acceptance, peace. A strength to see the right direction, and the strength to follow it.

They will all need it.

‘We should go back,’ he says.

She nods. ‘Of course. Just one moment,’ she replies.

Keeler walks away from him, limping, and faces the centrepiece of the frieze that dominates the wall. The figure on the throne, damaged and scarred, gold flaking and torn, is still discernible in the dust and gloom.

Slowly, painfully, she lowers herself until she is kneeling in the dust. She looks up at the figure on the wall.

She lifts up her hands.

AFTERWORD

The End and the Death is the final book of the Siege of Terra, and the culmination of the Horus Heresy. It contains, therefore, some of the most well-known and canonical episodes of Warhammer 40,000 mythology. By any measure, it is significant, and comes freighted with expectations, both from within Games Workshop, and from the global community of 40K.

I have been asked to talk about the composition of *The End and the Death*. I do so with reservation, as I believe a book should stand on its own merits, and not rely on any commentary from the author to qualify it. I can't, for example, discuss the writing of this book without talking about the difficulties involved. Was it a challenge to write? Yes, of course. Should knowledge of that effort make a difference to the reading experience? Not in the slightest. So I'll offer some observations, not seeking sympathy for my labours, but simply for the amusement of those who are intrigued by what is known as 'process'.

The End and the Death took two years to write, almost to the day. For comparison, a novel usually takes me between three and six months. This is hardly surprising, because a novel usually clocks in between ninety and one hundred and ten thousand words, and *The End and the Death* is the equivalent of four 'regular' novels. The size of the book reflects the scope of the material covered: the end of the Siege of Terra and the final clash between Horus and the Emperor. This is the most important and celebrated piece of the mythology, and the foundational fable of the entire universe of Warhammer 40K.

So this novel required 'scale', in every sense of the word. The main events, such as Sanguinius' fight with his brother, or Horus' battle with his father, had to be appropriately monumental. The three of them are, arguably, the most important and powerful characters in the entire IP. These

sequences required me to find an extra ‘gear’, a new range I could shift up into to do them justice. I’d never had to use it before, as I’d never written anything so stupendous, and I didn’t even know if I had it. It is worth reflecting that Horus Heresy and 40K novels are fearsomely monumental *anyway*. That is the very nature of this universe, with its epic conflicts and titanic struggles. I have written many ‘big’ books before, with major centrepiece events. I didn’t know if there was anywhere left to go. Can the already epic be made ‘more epic’?

The main events also had to be set in the context of a pan-global (or pan-system) war. There were good reasons for this. First, there were many other things going on at the time, some of great significance in their own right, and we needed to keep track of them and show how they related to each other. Second, I had to establish and maintain the requisite sense of a global scale. We needed to understand what was at stake, and share the experiences of other participants, some comparatively insignificant, who were caught up in the same historic moment. Third, I felt obliged to examine and, in many cases, tie up, the individual plot lines and stories of many secondary, but nevertheless beloved, characters. This was the end of the series, the grand finale. If open character threads, some of which have been running for years through the course of the Heresy novels, were not resolved here, there was no ‘next book’ to provide their closure. Finally, I needed to achieve a vital measure of contrast. If this book had just covered the main actions, then not only would it have failed to depict the entire event, it would have become relentless, and fairly one-note. Cutting away to another story strand, or a quieter moment, or a more minor character, allowed for much needed light and shade. If we just stuck with Horus versus the Emperor, it would become too much to swallow in one go. Stepping away from that fury periodically served to intensify the fury when we returned to it.

As a result of all of this, the term ‘scale’ also had to be applied to word count. I needed the real estate to embrace all

of the above. *The End and the Death* is not a long book because I felt it ought to be a long book. It *needed* to be a long book.

As the authorial team has discovered, Siege of Terra novels tend to run longer than 'regular' books. When I started work on Book 8, I honestly didn't know how long it would be. Nick Kyme, my editor, said, 'Just write it. Don't think about word count.' About six months in, as I broke the 150K barrier and realised the end was still a good way off, I warned him. We both knew that, past a certain count, it was physically, *mechanically* impossible to bind a hardback edition. As a result, Book 8 has been published in three volumes.

This three-volume format initially disguises the structure of the book. As I mentioned, in terms of word count, it is the equivalent of four regular novels and, at a push, I could have written four individual novels in the same time period. But a novel has its own anatomy, its own internal structure of beginning, middle and end, and the plot lines that thread between them, even if it's part of a sequence. *The End and the Death*, however, does not, in terms of individual volumes. It is one novel, and its beginning, middle and end, and its plot lines, run across all *three* volumes at a much greater scale. Seen from 'close up', for example while reading Volume I, that greater structure is not immediately apparent. Some threads may even seem to be hanging, or aimless. That's because readers are subconsciously used to sensing the familiar arcs contained within the covers of a book (yes, even when they know it's part of a larger novel). In many respects, the full structure of Book 8 only becomes visible when readers reach Volume III, where previously separate or individual plot threads begin to connect, or pay off, or cross over in unexpected ways. Storylines that may have first appeared as interesting but random diversions suddenly reveal their true significance.

So 'scale' applies to the very structure of the book itself. The foundations, the architecture of the book, are simply bigger than we might expect. And if the scale of that architecture is

unfamiliar to the readers, I can assure you that it is unfamiliar to the author too. I have never written anything this big, and by ‘big’ I don’t mean word count. Four novels composed in the same time period would have been easier, because each one would have had its own internal form, its own beginning and end, its own closure (and creative satisfaction), and its own breathing space afterwards. Moving through four novels, one after the other, would have given me four different projects to engage with, and four opportunities to refresh my mind. I have previously likened writing a novel to carrying around a heavy piece of luggage for a few months. It stays with you during the writing period. When you finally set it down, there is a palpable sense of relief as you let all of that mental luggage go. Not so with *The End and the Death*. When I delivered Volume I, and then Volume II, there was no respite, only the mild satisfaction of reaching a milestone. I had not finished anything, even though a book was on its way to copy-edits and the printer. The weight of the novel, the luggage of plot and architecture, remained in my head. It stayed with me for two full years. It was there when I went to bed, it was there when I woke up, it was there when I was doing the shopping or watching some TV to wind down. There was no escaping it until it was done. It was gruelling, and required previously untapped levels of stamina.

But it was also the most creatively rewarding thing I have done in my career so far.

Once I had resolved to show the full scope, from major characters to minor, the ‘global view’, I realised I would have to keep multiple, simultaneous story strands in play. To sustain that motion, like spinning plates, I switched between them as rapidly as possible, via short, single-focus chapters. Where a more wide-angle effect was needed to balance the tightly focused strands, I elected to drop in occasional chapters (usually titled ‘Fragments’) that would add a more impressionistic flavour, or would combine various strands that were urgently occurring at the same moment.

I also decided that nothing betrays a ‘B story’ or ‘C story’ for what it is more than a reduced level of attention and image resolution. I didn’t want the supporting story strands to feel trivial or disposable, so I decided that everything should, in its own way, be written with the same degree of intent. If the storylines of the Emperor, Horus and Sanguinius were going to be written in high definition, all the other strands (Keeler, Fo, Dorn, Sindermann, Oll, Vulkan, Rann, etc.) had to receive the same treatment. Wherever we were in the book, the most important moment was *that moment*. Nothing could feel like padding, and nothing could feel as if it was designed to be skimmed, or skipped as inconsequential.

The framing device of the book (everything is collapsing into the warp, and thus even time has stopped), assisted greatly in this, because every moment became ‘now’. The end of the Siege of Terra *is* about an epic clash of demigods, but it’s also about Terra, the planet, and the fate of mankind, so the planet and mankind needed to be on screen throughout, reminding us what was at risk, and the *experience* of the planet and mankind had to be reflected. ‘I was there…’ as… *someone* once wrote. I was determined that the reader would feel like they were ‘there’, wherever they were in the book.

Some of the novel’s strands exist for important, if not immediately obvious, reasons. Both the ‘Rann and Zephon’ strand and the ‘Corswain and the Dark Angels at the Hollow Mountain’ strand initially function as representations of the ongoing Siege conflict. They are the backbone of the depiction of the general global warfare that is raging while the pivotal invasion of the *Vengeful Spirit* takes place. In both cases (and also with other strands like Amit, Thane, Agathe and Sartak) they serve as counterpoint, showing courageous loyalists trying to hold on against the odds in the hope of ultimate salvation. They are reminders of the conflict that the core of the book seeks to resolve. But both develop by the end of the novel to serve other purposes. Rann and Zephon’s strand allows the book to witness, first-hand and up close, the nightmarish consequences of Sanguinius’ death, a key part of

the story and of 40K lore in general. Corswain's strand reveals a new and significant part of the IP. It tackles the issue of the Astronomican, and delves into the long-term internal schisms of the Dark Angels, before connecting, quite literally, *all* of the secondary storylines with the central battle between Horus and the Emperor. Although it seems, at first, to be an adventurous subplot revelling in the valiant exploits of the Dark Angels, perhaps unexpected participants in the final battle of Terra, it is revealed by Volume III to be entirely pivotal. I tried to make both strands evoke different types of conflict to create contrast. Rann and Zephon are locked in what might be seen as quite 'modern' modes of warfare (especially in the room-to-room clearance sequence at Hasgard) before descending into the utter madness and frenzy of the endgame as they are engulfed by the brunt of the traitor assault. With Corswain, though the action is equally ferocious, I attempted to portray a more 'dark age' form of warfare, redolent of Arthurian myth, and riven with dark magic. The Dark Angels are knights in plate armour, circling for a last stand behind their shield wall as the most malign sorcery closes in.

Sindermann's strand offers, by contrast, a quieter and more contemplative viewpoint of events, and perhaps a welcome moment to breathe. Like Fo, Malcador and Oll, I wanted Sindermann to be a voice for some of the core ideas and concepts, offering up notions even if they contradicted the viewpoints of others in the book. Take from them all what truths seem right to you. Sindermann, however, is also a literal voice, linking, both directly and indirectly, almost everything else that is going on. Through the pervasive medium of the warp, what Sindermann and Mauer read aloud in the library drifts out through the entire book and seeds itself in other storylines, as though carried as an echo, or transmitted as a meme. In some places, this is explicit, as in Mauer's recitation from the *Book of Samus*, which is remotely experienced by Loken and Abaddon, and serves (though Mauer and Sindermann are unaware) to fortify Loken in extremis. In many other instances, it is far more subtle. Sentences, phrases and even single words spoken by them in their search

deliberately recur in the thoughts and speech of other characters. The ‘secret texts’ they quote from are sometimes invented for the book, but are also sometimes genuine works, sampling the likes of Shelley, Eliot, Milton and Tennyson. You can find the echoes everywhere: with Dorn (mainly T.S. Eliot), with Corswain (Shelley, particularly), the Emperor (Shelley, again, and Tennyson), Oll Persson (Tennyson most of all) and so on. They are, I suppose, motifs, the prose equivalent of musical refrains recurring in the soundtrack of a movie. The point of this was to create a haunting, perhaps distressing, sense of synchronicity, of correlation and concurrence, to suggest that at this still point, with the warp all around, reality is overlapping and ringing with uncanny coincidence. Ideas are becoming interlocked, and thoughts are beginning to resonate, one mind to another. The dying world is so distorted, it is starting to rhyme.

I drew on poetry to do this in order to reflect one of the book’s themes: that imagination (and by extension emotion, and art) is one of humanity’s foremost qualities. The Emperor recognises this, and has preserved it, both literally and genetically. But it is not necessarily recognised or valued by those living in this mechanised, brutal and very secular world. Imagination is the key tool with which the warp may be apprehended. It is the root of magic. It is also, perhaps, one of the foundations on which the new era of man would have been built. As far back as *Horus Rising*, characters spoke about the roles that primarchs and Astartes would fill, as cultural architects and wise leaders, once the war is over. But the war will not be over, and even in the aspirational age of the new Imperium, such things are easily forgotten or de-prioritised. Certainly, during the bloody Heresy and the overwhelming Siege, they seem entirely non-essential compared to basic survival.

Sindermann’s strand, and the other story threads that it touches, reflects what is lost, or what is being lost, the decline towards inhumanity that will characterise the 40K era. Imagination is an irreplaceable human resource. As I said a

moment ago, it is the root of magic. Your passionate engagement with the Warhammer 40K universe, your enthusiasm for the lore, your devotion to your magnificently curated armies, and the very fact you are reading this, and any other Black Library book, proves you are all adepts.

I won't, by the way, specifically cite all the poetry and prose quoted in the echoes of this novel. If you are so inclined, you can easily trace them for yourself using a search engine, and discover their origins. I would, however, like to specifically identify the quotation presented at the very start of Volume I, because the poet is less well known, and the conventions of in-universe attribution are deliberately intended to obscure historical provenance. The poem 'Not for that City' (1902) is by Charlotte Mew.

The choice to write in the present tense was also an early decision. It made sense because time had stopped, and everything was 'now', but the present tense also adds urgency and immediacy to a story, so I felt the drama would be enhanced. Furthermore, the Horus Heresy and the Siege of Terra is 'the past' (in 40K terms), and we often treat it as legendary and mythic. The point of writing the entire Heresy series was to 'put the reader on the ground', in the thick of things, and show how things 'actually were'. If you want the mythical or legendary version of events, then look to the classic *Visions of Heresy* or any of the wonderful old lore accounts from the early rulebooks. These novels are intended to be a glimpse of the unvarnished truth, of the 'real' version, and I decided that the present tense would emphasise that sense of reality. This isn't far away or long ago, nor is it lensed through ancient, retold fable. This is happening *right now*, right in *front* of you.

It's worth noting that writing in the present tense is exhausting. Writing in the past tense allows an author to mentally take a breath and step back. Present tense is constantly there, whirring away. I realised this writing *Know No Fear*, a book that benefited from the use of present tense, but which was also demanding to write. You'd think I would

have learned from that, especially when embarking on a much bigger book that would take longer to complete. It's as though I was trying to make life difficult for myself.

Indeed, you'd think I would have learned, *period*. I've written many novels, and when you've done something a few times, you gain experience, and develop skills to make the process easier. I knew *The End and the Death* would be different, but I had not anticipated how much I would have to re-invent my entire process. Leaving aside length (and thus the duration of the job), my novels have almost always been written in one, evolving draft, and each one has generated maybe a small notebook's worth of ideas and reminders along the way. Surely, this novel would simply require a slightly bigger notebook…?

If only. Volumes I and II each went through three complete drafts, and Volume III went through two, but only because I'd resolved most of the complications by then. I also started taking painstaking notes from day one, attempting to collate all the details, and keep track of all the threads (including all the notes from the regular Siege of Terra meetings, and one-on-one discussions with the other Siege authors). Forget notebooks. I quickly decided to keep my notes typed, for clarity (no more puzzling over handwritten scrawls), and for searchability. Six months into the writing process, I had already assembled five hundred pages, double-sided, of ongoing notes. I kept printing them out so I could go over them again and again with a text-liner. They fill a file box. The notes alone look like a long manuscript.

I look back now at *Saturnine* (Book 4), previously my 'biggest novel', and I'm amused by the afterword I wrote then, in which I innocently marvelled at the amount of notes I had taken while writing it. In fact, when my editor asked me for this afterword, I was tempted to tell him to reprint the *Saturnine* afterword, and add at the end of it the words 'exactly like this, but ten times more'.

The vast body of notes, in itself, required a change in my daily working practice. And the references… I had stacks of

books heaped around my desk for two years, until it looked less like I was writing a book, and more like I was building a book-fort.

My greatest reference resource was my fellow Siege of Terra authors, my editor, and various great minds at GW, all of whom were generous with their time, and gracious with their efforts. Everyone enthusiastically pitched in on the (many) ongoing email discussion threads, or agreed (so naively!) to Zoom with me to discuss the aspects of lore that were their particular areas of expertise. Aaron Dembski-Bowden was halfway through Book 7 when I started Book 8, so we spoke on an especially regular basis to make sure our books 'joined up' (much as Graham McNeill and I had done on the very first two Heresy novels back in the day). As Aaron and I are both early risers, the best time for these chats was ridiculous o'clock in the morning, and became known as 'the Dorn Patrol'. I hope ADB benefited from those conversations as much as I did.

A further goal I set for myself in *The End and the Death* was to try to capture a little of the spirit and flavour of 'old Warhammer', the *Rogue Trader* era. There is a distinct difference between the eras of the Heresy and 40K, and we've always tried to establish that clearly, but I felt with Book 8 we were really saying goodbye to the golden age of 30K, and it was a last chance to celebrate and salute the *really* early days, and the sheer, unconfined madness of things like the classic *Realm of Chaos: Slaves to Darkness*. I still love looking at, and being inspired by, those old volumes, where the IP wasn't yet fully defined, and creative madness ran wild in the most berserk and ingenious ways. As Book 8 was portraying a world overrun by Chaos and the warp, it seemed an ideal time to draw deeply on those formative texts, to capture that exotic invention, and to tip the hat to those early days of the hobby when the myth of the Horus Heresy first appeared. It was a way, I felt, to reinforce a sense of the Emperor's history, and of the way the world (both in-universe and out) had changed. So the sharp-eyed among you may spot various names and

vocabulary choices that I deliberately borrowed from those old Realms of Chaos and the early novels. Cover artist Neil Roberts has done more than anyone to establish the visual tone of the Heresy era as a contrast to the 40K era, and we've always been true to that superb vision in the novels. I intended to maintain that, but to add in a little more of the yet-more-ancient epoch of proto-Warhammer. I even dug out some really, really old miniatures (including, of course, LE 2) and set them on my shelf to watch over me. Yes, it's nostalgia, but Warhammer 40,000 (the game) has a long and complex history of its own, and I wanted a dusting of those very early days to invest (infect?) the book, to add to its sense of a deep and grotesque history.

The multiple full drafts were a consequence of the fact that there were so many eyes on this project. There is a fair degree of scrutiny on work when it's being created for a valuable IP, and every book I've ever written for BL has gone through an approvals process. But the climax of the Siege of Terra is such a vital piece of lore, it had to be checked and re-checked at every level by the various divisions of GW, and the very High Lords themselves. That's how it's supposed to work. Every time I refined or made adjustments, it was with excellent notes from the guardians of the IP. GW had confidence in me, and they were giving me all the assistance they could. We were only going to get one shot at this, and we had to do it properly. There were expectations, and thus performance pressure. My mantra became 'I have to stick the landing'. *The End and the Death* had to be a worthy conclusion to a beloved series that had been running since 2006, and into which a great number of people (both the authors and the general readership) had invested a great deal.

That, throughout, was my greatest concern.

There was also very little room for flexibility and invention (or so it seemed to me at the start). *The End and the Death* covers the most detailed and well-known part of Heresy lore. There was a whole string of significant and established moments that had to be covered, covered well, and covered in the right

order. Everybody (pretty much) knew what was going to happen, so it *all had to happen*. I believe one of the reasons *Saturnine* was so well liked was that there wasn't a lot of established lore there for me to get wrong. I was creating a suitable story in a cavity in the canon. That wasn't going to be the case with Book 8. There was no room to move, or freedom to create. Everything that the community expected had to be there… Yet the novel also had to entertain and surprise, or it would simply be a particularly grandiose piece of colour text.

I was honoured to have been asked to write the last book, and excited to be finishing a long series that I had myself begun with *Horus Rising*. But I also knew it would be uniquely taxing.

So that's why I set myself that list of goals, goals of scope and detail and range, of multiple character strands, of serious ambition (also known as hubris). If the story was predominately preordained, then I would simply attempt to write my *best version* of the received story. Every piece of established lore that I had to include was carefully considered in the following ways: Which version of it is the best to include (for in some cases there are many contradictory versions in 40K mythology)? What order should they appear in (for in some cases, the specific order is not defined)? What is the most memorable way of showing this (in terms of style and point of view)? Is there anything I can bring to this that will be unexpected, *without altering the lore or dashing expectations*?

This last aspect was fruitful. In several cases, it turned out there was a considerable amount of creative space. We knew how some things happened, but not why. We knew why other things happened, but not how. We knew that some things happened, but not what the immediate consequences or reactions were. These things, coupled with the invention real estate created by the sheer scope of the book (all those other 'minor' storylines and characters), suddenly gave me an enormous amount of freedom. I believe *The End and the Death* has a great many twists and surprise moments in it, far

more than we might expect to fit into such a preordained story. These twists are precisely what a work of fiction needs to sustain it.

Another objective I set for myself was to differentiate, as much as I could, the 'voices' of the book. In some cases, this is very obvious – Malcador is the only first-person voice, and thus set apart; Horus is eerily second-person, so we're close to him, but still held at bay (just who *is* talking to him?) Typhus, though appearing briefly, is deliciously and creepily first-person plural. But other strands, while all third-person present, had to have their own feel too, and that extended beyond the point of view or the dialogue, and into the prose itself. The sections featuring Corswain and the Dark Angels, for instance, deliberately employ more archaic vocabulary and a lack of contractions, as though taken from a story of chivalric legend; in contrast, the sections featuring the Long Companions (as Oll and John are perhaps the most 'modern' of the characters in the book) are written in a more contemporary, contracted style, and feature more modern vocabulary.

As for the Emperor, there lay the greatest hurdle: how do you write a book where one of the three main characters cannot directly appear (for the Emperor is ultimately unknowable and must never really become an active character)? Did you notice that reading it? The Emperor is there throughout, he is very present, but he (or should I say 'He'?) is not really there either, not like, say, Loken or Dorn. He seldom speaks directly. He is communicated *by others*. The Emperor is present in his absence, a defined shape in the midst of the prose created by the observations of characters like Malcador, Caecaltus, Horus, and others like Loken and Leetu. This inner tier of characters become the direct eyewitnesses to his actions, but there are other strands of the book, which appear quite separate (for example the threads of Fo, Sindermann, Vulkan, Keeler, and Oll and the Long Companions), and which operate as a kind of chorus, voicing and discussing (often in contrasting and contradictory ways) the Emperor and his

history. We learn, I hope, as much about the Emperor when he isn't 'on screen' as we do when he is.

The Emperor is a divisive figure, fundamental to our lore. Some are devoted to his service, venerating him as the saviour of humanity. Others despise him, regarding him as callous, hubristic and so self-regarding he is the root of all mankind's woes. Polar extremes, with many gradations of possibility in between. This division of opinion is as true for the 40K community as it is for the characters in-universe. By articulating many opposing and conflicting ideas about him in the course of the book, I am inviting you to consider the answer for yourselves. Where do you stand? The Emperor is inscrutable, a being of many aspects. Is it possible, despite the contradictions, that he is *all* of those things at once?

Along with conscious style choices, vocabulary was a useful tool. To cite an obvious example, Malcador again. The Sigillite is supposed to be one of the most intelligent people ever, so I deliberately weighted his sections with perhaps the most complex or obscure vocabulary in the book. It's not a simple case of 'Malcador must be the smartest character in the book, because he uses the biggest words', it's more a case of suggesting that we can barely keep up with the agility and range of his thoughts.

The book is also full of allusion and sidelong reference, what we might refer to as 'Easter Eggs'. Some are subtle and tangential, some are blindingly obvious (Abaddon's 'Shields up!' is an efficiently succinct – *two word!* – summation of his demeanour). While many of you will get many of the references, not everyone will get the same ones, and I doubt anyone will get all of them. One day, perhaps, I will be persuaded to produce an annotated version of this book, as I have done with *Xenos*. There's scarcely a line, or at least a paragraph, in the whole book that doesn't make some nod to something in the lore, if only by dint of word choice.

The End and the Death is a book about events, but, ultimately, I believe it stands or falls on the strength of its characters. Story is always about character. By having such a range of

characters in play (I worked quite hard to at least name-check just about every ‘named’ character who would have been present. There is one notable exception… Did you spot it?) I had a formidable array of personalities and textures to play with, and this in turn resulted in some unexpectedly emotional moments. Unexpected even to me. The big emotional beats (just like the big plot beats) are there, of course, but unanticipated ones emerge too. Malcador taking the Throne (as seen by his Chosen) seems to me surprisingly poignant. Vulkan’s stoic assumption of supreme command, and the tenacity with which he conducts that near-intolerable responsibility. Dorn’s isolation and fading memory. And who would have thought that a wretched servant of the Dark Mechanicum could so plaintively personify grief and loss? I worked as diligently as possible throughout to keep the individual characters of the book, big and small, as clearly differentiated and true to themselves as possible.

The centrepieces of the book are, of course, the two big duels: Horus against Sanguinius, and Horus against the Emperor. Given their obvious similarities (two demigods slugging it out), I wanted them to feel different, and each worthy in its own right, rather than one just being a ‘bigger’ version of the other. The end of Sanguinius’ story needed to do justice to his significance in the lore, and not be overshadowed by the main event. I elected to stage it as a conventional battle, and to repeatedly switch perspectives (between third-person Sanguinius, and second-person Horus) to show the different ways they were reacting to the situation and understanding the fight.

It is a heroic clash, and a cumulative battle, and it ends in a series of quite grisly and horrible moments. I believe the line ‘Nevertheless, it does,’ is quite chilling, and we might expect the sequence to end on that sinister note. But no, we return to see the full, ghastly ending. This is not meant to take away from the heroism, but rather to lean into the idea that this is the unexpurgated ‘real version’, as I mentioned earlier. It is not, in the end, a glorious death, nor is it dressed up in the splendour

of legend and myth. It is unashamedly brutal. We start the book knowing he is going to die, and how. I wanted that inevitable demise still to come as a shock, if only for different reasons.

For the Emperor, a distinct type of clash was needed. Given the minor obstacle of the Emperor not being an active participant in the narrative, I had to tell it from the point of view of Horus, or via other witnesses. These multiple (and unreliable) perspectives reminded me at once of the Emperor's own 'unreliable' aspect, and the fact that he appears in different ways to different people. The duel, I felt, should propagate the same way. It begins conventionally enough (albeit at a spectacular power level), but then accelerates. This is where that 'extra gear' was critical. The clash also happens across several 'rounds', instead of one long bout like Sanguinius' duel. The first of those rounds – the longest single chapter in the novel, I think – is told from Horus' point of view, and demonstrates that gear-changing escalation. It is breathless and unremitting. The 'conventional' fighting shifts to psychic war, revealing that it has been waged on multiple levels all along. To achieve the unfolding of this first shift, I used locations in the way I had previously used weapons (so, 'He parries me with his sword' becomes 'He parries me with Cthonia'). We understand this is still a fight, because of the sentence structure, but the weapons have changed, and thus the manner of the fight must have seamlessly changed too. The fight is expanding outwards, and proliferating. It is everywhere. It is physical and in the mind. It is operating on multiple levels. Then we shift again, and extend the fight to more magical areas, employing aspects and the infinite dimensions of the warp.

My intent, which I hope has been realised, is that each time you think the fight can't get any bigger, it does. The final gear shift (of the first bout at least) is into the use of Tarot. As with location, tarot cards – or, more specifically, the value and meaning of tarot cards – become weapons, wielded and

deployed by sentence structure in the way that swords and claws, and then places, were previously wielded.

Their fight, like the novel itself, constantly presented me with the same key problem: if we're starting big, how much bigger can we go? At what point will I simply run out of superlatives that are bigger than the ones I have used before? There were times when I genuinely wondered where else I could go to make it (as the bard has it) 'one louder'.

That's the scale issue again, that early pre-set goal. To make big things look big, you've got to show small things by way of comparison. And you've then got to *keep* doing that all the way through. Should anyone ever question the screen time given to 'smaller' characters like Sindermann, Rann, Agathe or Hassan (to name but a few), there are many strong answers, but the one they all have in common is 'size comparison'. Why is Oll important? He's important because he's small and not important. Why is Loken present? Because he's insignificant. There are actually many reasons why these and other characters are in play and vital, but you get my drift. Having spent many years writing for BL and working to make Space Marines and, occasionally, primarchs dramatically larger than life, I now had to do the same thing with the biggest characters in the canon, in a book where a great number of the rest of the cast were Space Marines or primarchs.

Book 8 is not merely the end of the Siege sequence, and a sequel to Book 7, and thus, indirectly Book 6, etc. In order to 'stick that landing' in a satisfying way, it had to also serve as a sequel to… Well, to everything that has come before. It had to act as a sequel or finale to *every* book (and short story) in the Horus Heresy series. It draws, very directly, on some books in obvious ways: on *Legion*, on *Master of Mankind*, on the other Siege books. There are hints and salutes to everything. Most of all, I feel it is a sequel to *Horus Rising*, and not just for selfish reasons. This is the story that began there coming full circle. That's why I made space for as many *Horus Rising* characters (as still survived) to be present: Loken, Keeler, Sindermann,

Abaddon. This is the end of their journey, and in them we see how fundamentally things have changed. And that's why I deliberately go back, especially with Loken and Sanguinius aboard the *Vengeful Spirit*, to literally see how places have altered. These various callbacks are obviously nostalgic, but they also serve the story. And the title, after all, is a direct quote from Samus in that first book.

When we began the Horus Heresy series, the best part of twenty years ago, we all fervently hoped it would work, and that we would get to complete the entire saga. There were many things that we didn't know. We didn't know how successful the series would be. We didn't know how long it would be, or how many novels it would take. We certainly didn't appreciate the scale. I don't think, back then, we honestly thought we would get there. If the series did actually conclude some day, we thought, it probably wouldn't be *us* writing it. There is something incredible about getting to write the ending of a project that has lasted this long. I truly see it as a privilege. Thank you all for taking this long ride with us.

So I hope you'll forgive me for using this afterword to do the thing I said at the start I thought was unseemly; that is, to have an author bleat on about how hard a book was to write. That's what this afterword is supposed to be about.

One last note. Literally. One of the key and abiding notes I got from GW during the composition of this novel was 'retain the mystery'. There is an enormous amount of detail and specificity in this book, but by the end I hope there is still a significant degree of mystery about the lore and the warp and everything else. That's just as it should be. Not everything should be explained, or this universe we all love is diminished.

I hope you've enjoyed this series, and this finale. I hope it delivered everything that you wanted it to. Thank you, more than anything else, for wanting it to be written, and reading it once it was. It wouldn't have happened without you.

Dan Abnett,

Maidstone, January 2023

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The author would like to thank, one last time, the ‘High Lords’: Nick Kyme, Guy Haley, Chris Wraight (*nods* ‘Doctor’), John French (I hope this took you there, John), Gav Thorpe, and Aaron Dembski-Bowden, for their support and assistance throughout. It’s been quite a ride, and we all have ‘siege-face’ now. I will circle back and mention Nick Kyme a second time. As series editor, he has been a one-man Astronomican, and has helped keep the book on course and me sane, despite everything else going on at the time. Thank you.

It is not an exaggeration to say that this book would not have ended up the way it is without my wife, Nik. The same can be said for every book I’ve written for Black Library, from *First and Only* onwards. As a result, she is always name-checked with gratitude in these end credits. But on a milestone book like this, a mere name-check is not sufficient. Not only is she always my first reader and copy-wrangler, making inspired suggestions when I have been entirely lost in the weeds, she has also had to put up with me, and the routine (and fallout) of the process I have spent the last several thousand words describing. And that’s true *every single time* I write a novel, though this particular go-around has lasted two years, which has tested even her reserves of patience. I cannot really express how much I appreciate her support, skill and forbearance, except with love, and these few inadequate words. She makes me look good, and not just in print.

Thanks are also due to Jacob Youngs (honorary High Lord) and Karen Miksza, Jess Woo for copy-edit brilliance, Rachel Harrison for her diligent work supervising the maps and art, and the ridiculously talented cover artist Neil Roberts who, like me, can look back at the start and say ‘I was there’.

Alongside Neil, I owe a debt to the many artists who have visualised this universe, and these events, over the years, and from whom I have drawn vital inspiration. There are too many

deserving of mention, some for considerable and sustained bodies of work, others simply for memorable or influential spot illustrations. But of particular note, Adrian Smith's towering portrait of the Emperor facing Horus was a touchstone I returned to on many occasions, and no roll-call of artists would be complete without John Blanche, whose work has done more to establish the overall visual tone of Warhammer 40K than anyone else.

I'd like to thank proofreaders Jake Stow and Kirsten Knight, and the translation teams, for all-round brilliance and numerous clever pick-ups, and the artists: Francesca Baerald (the ravishing map), Zuzanna Wuzyck (busts), Mikhail Savier (black and white internals), and Mauro Belfiore (the primarch portrait internals). I would also like to express my appreciation to Tom McDowell at Black Library, Andy Hoare and Tony Cottrell at Forge World, and to Max Bottrill and everyone else at Games Workshop for their continued support and direction. Thanks also to the Warhammer players, the supportive readership and their feedback, to Henry Cavill for his encouragement, and to the loyal boys of the 403rd, now immortal.

As this is the end of the series, I wanted to take this opportunity to voice my appreciation to everyone who has contributed to the Horus Heresy series, or created and inspired the Warhammer 40K lore over the last forty years. A comprehensive list of those people would probably fill another volume, so to keep it simple, I would like to extend my thanks to the staff and freelancers of Games Workshop, past and present, for the universe they have helped to build and, last but not least, to Ian Watson, to whom this book is respectfully dedicated.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dan Abnett has written over fifty novels, including the acclaimed Gaunt's Ghosts series and the Ravenor, Eisenhorn and Bequin books. His work for the Horus Heresy includes the first book in the series, *Horus Rising*, and the three-volume-long conclusion, *The End and the Death*. He also wrote several novels in between: *Legion*, *The Unremembered Empire*, *Know No Fear*, *Prospero Burns* and *Saturnine*. He scripted *Macragge's Honour*, the first Horus Heresy graphic novel, as well as numerous Black Library audio dramas. Many of his short stories have been collected into the volume *Lord of the Dark Millennium*. He lives and works in Maidstone, Kent.

An extract from Dawn of Fire: Avenging Son**.**

‘I was there at the Siege of Terra,’ Vitrian Messinius would say in his later years.

‘I was there…’ he would add to himself, his words never meant for ears but his own. ‘I was there the day the Imperium died.’

But that was yet to come.

‘To the walls! To the walls! The enemy is coming!’ Captain Messinius, as he was then, led his Space Marines across the Penitent’s Square high up on the Lion’s Gate. ‘Another attack! Repel them! Send them back to the warp!’

Thousands of red-skinned monsters born of fear and sin scaled the outer ramparts, fury and murder incarnate. The mortals they faced quailed. It took the heart of a Space Marine to stand against them without fear, and the Angels of Death were in short supply.

‘Another attack, move, move! To the walls!’

They came in the days after the Avenging Son returned, emerging from nothing, eight legions strong, bringing the bulk of their numbers to bear against the chief entrance to the Imperial Palace. A decapitation strike like no other, and it came perilously close to success.

Messinius’ Space Marines ran to the parapet edging the Penitent’s Square. On many worlds, the square would have been a plaza fit to adorn the centre of any great city. Not on Terra. On the immensity of the Lion’s Gate, it was nothing, one of hundreds of similarly huge spaces. The word ‘gate’ did not suit the scale of the cityscape. The Lion’s Gate’s bulk marched up into the sky, step by titanic step, until it rose far higher than the mountains it had supplanted. The gate had been built by the Emperor Himself, they said. Myths detailed the improbable supernatural feats required to raise it. They were lies, all of them, and belittled the true effort needed to build such an edifice. Though the Lion’s Gate was made to His design and by His command, the soaring monument had been constructed by mortals, with mortal hands and mortal tools.

Messinius wished that had been remembered. For men to build this was far more impressive than any godly act of creation. If men could remember that, he believed, then perhaps they would remember their own strength.

The uncanny may not have built the gate, but it threatened to bring it down. Messinius looked over the rampart lip, down to the lower levels thousands of feet below and the spread of the Anterior Barbican.

Upon the stepped fortifications of the Lion's Gate was armour of every colour and the blood of every loyal primarch. Dozens of regiments stood alongside them. Aircraft filled the sky. Guns boomed from every quarter. In the churning redness on the great roads, processional ways so huge they were akin to prairies cast in rockcrete, were flashes of gold where the Emperor's Custodian Guard battled. The might of the Imperium was gathered there, in the palace where He dwelt.

There seemed moments on that day when it might not be enough.

The outer ramparts were carpeted in red bodies that writhed and heaved, obscuring the great statues adorning the defences and covering over the guns, an invasive cancer consuming reality. The enemy were legion. There were too many foes to defeat by plan and ruse. Only guns, and will, would see the day won, but the defenders were so pitifully few.

Messinius called a wordless halt, clenched fist raised, seeking the best place to deploy his mixed company, veterans all of the Terran Crusade. Gunships and fighters sped overhead, unleashing deadly light and streams of bombs into the packed daemonic masses. There were innumerable cannons crammed onto the gate, and they all fired, rippling the structure with false earthquakes. Soon the many ships and orbital defences of Terra would add their guns, targeting the very world they were meant to guard, but the attack had come so suddenly; as yet they had had no time to react.

The noise was horrendous. Messinius' audio dampers were at maximum and still the roar of ordnance stung his ears. Those

humans that survived today would be rendered deaf. But he would have welcomed more guns, and louder still, for all the defensive fury of the assailed palace could not drown out the hideous noise of the daemons – their sighing hisses, a billion serpents strong, and chittering, screaming wails. It was not only heard but sensed within the soul, the realms of spirit and of matter were so intertwined. Messinius' being would be forever stained by it.

Tactical information scrolled down his helmplate, near environs only. He had little strategic overview of the situation. The vox-channels were choked with a hellish screaming that made communication impossible. The noosphere was disrupted by etheric backwash spilling from the immaterial rifts the daemons poured through. Messinius was used to operating on his own. Small-scale, surgical actions were the way of the Adeptus Astartes, but in a battle of this scale, a lack of central coordination would lead inevitably to defeat. This was not like the first Siege, where his kind had fought in Legions.

He called up a company-wide vox-cast and spoke to his warriors. They were not his Chapter-kin, but they would listen. The primarch himself had commanded that they do so.

'Reinforce the mortals,' he said. 'Their morale is wavering. Position yourselves every fifty yards. Cover the whole of the south-facing front. Let them see you.' He directed his warriors by chopping at the air with his left hand. His right, bearing an inactive power fist, hung heavily at his side. 'Assault Squad Antiocles, back forty yards, single firing line. Prepare to engage enemy breakthroughs only on my mark. Devastators, split to demi-squads and take up high ground, sergeant and sub-squad prime's discretion as to positioning and target. Remember our objective, heavy infliction of casualties. We kill as many as we can, we retreat, then hold at the Penitent's Arch until further notice. Command squad, with me.'

Command squad was too grand a title for the mismatched crew Messinius had gathered around himself. His own officers were light years away, if they still lived.

‘Doveskamor, Tidominus,’ he said to the two Aurora Marines with him. ‘Take the left.’

‘Yes, captain,’ they voxed, and jogged away, their green armour glinting orange in the hell-light of the invasion.

The rest of his scratch squad was comprised of a communications specialist from the Death Spectres, an Omega Marine with a penchant for plasma weaponry, and a Raptor holding an ancient standard he’d taken from a dusty display.

‘Why did you take that, Brother Kryvesh?’ Messinius asked, as they moved forward.

‘The palace is full of such relics,’ said the Raptor. ‘It seems only right to put them to use. No one else wanted it.’

Messinius stared at him.

‘What? If the gate falls, we’ll have more to worry about than my minor indiscretion. It’ll be good for morale.’

The squads were splitting to join the standard humans. Such was the noise many of the men on the wall had not noticed their arrival, and a ripple of surprise went along the line as they appeared at their sides. Messinius was glad to see they seemed more firm when they turned their eyes back outwards.

‘Anzigus,’ he said to the Death Spectre. ‘Hold back, facilitate communication within the company. Maximum signal gain. This interference will only get worse. See if you can get us patched in to wider theatre command. I’ll take a hardline if you can find one.’

‘Yes, captain,’ said Anzigus. He bowed a helm that was bulbous with additional equipment. He already had the access flap of the bulky vox-unit on his arm open. He withdrew, the aerials on his power plant extending. He headed towards a systems nexus on the far wall of the plaza, where soaring buttresses pushed back against the immense weight bearing down upon them.

Messinius watched him go. He knew next to nothing about Anzigus. He spoke little, and when he did, his voice was

funereal. His Chapter was mysterious, but the same lack of familiarity held true for many of these warriors, thrown together by miraculous events. Over their years lost wandering in the warp, Messinius had come to see some as friends as well as comrades, others he hardly knew, and none he knew so well as his own Chapter brothers. But they would stand together. They were Space Marines. They had fought by the returned primarch's side, and in that they shared a bond. They would not stint in their duty now.

Messinius chose a spot on the wall, directing his other veterans to left and right. Kryvesh he sent to the mortal officer's side. He looked down again, out past the enemy and over the outer palace. Spires stretched away in every direction. Smoke rose from all over the landscape. Some of it was new, the work of the daemon horde, but Terra had been burning for weeks. The Astronomican had failed. The galaxy was split in two. Behind them in the sky turned the great palace gyre, its deep eye marking out the throne room of the Emperor Himself.

'Sir!' A member of the Palatine Guard shouted over the din. He pointed downwards, to the left. Messinius followed his wavering finger. Three hundred feet below, daemons were climbing. They came upwards in a triangle tipped by a brute with a double rack of horns. It clambered hand over hand, far faster than should be possible, flying upwards, as if it touched the side of the towering gate only as a concession to reality. A Space Marine with claw locks could not have climbed that fast.

'Soldiers of the Imperium! The enemy is upon us!'

He looked to the mortals. Their faces were blanched with fear. Their weapons shook. Their bravery was commendable nonetheless. Not one of them attempted to run, though a wave of terror preceded the unnatural things clambering up towards them.

'We shall not turn away from our duty, no matter how fearful the foe, or how dire our fates may be,' he said. 'Behind us is

the Sanctum of the Emperor Himself. As He has watched over you, now it is your turn to stand in guardianship over Him.'

The creatures were drawing closer. Through a sliding, magnified window on his display, Messinius looked into the yellow and cunning eyes of their leader. A long tongue lolled permanently from the thing's mouth, licking at the wall, tasting the terror of the beings it protected.

Boltgun actions clicked. His men leaned over the parapet, towering over the mortals as the Lion's Gate towered over the Ultimate Wall. A wealth of targeting data was exchanged, warrior to warrior, as each chose a unique mark. No bolt would be wasted in the opening fusillade. They could hear the creatures' individual shrieks and growls, all wordless, but their meaning was clear: blood, blood, blood. Blood and skulls.

Messinius sneered at them. He ignited his power fist with a swift jerk. He always preferred the visceral thrill of manual activation. Motors came to full life. Lightning crackled around it. He aimed downwards with his bolt pistol. A reticule danced over diabolical faces, each a copy of all the others. These things were not real. They were not alive. They were projections of a false god. The Librarian Atramo had named them maladies. A spiritual sickness wearing ersatz flesh.

He reminded himself to be wary. Contempt was as thick as any armour, but these things were deadly, for all their unreality.

He knew. He had fought the Neverborn many times before.

'While He lives,' Messinius shouted, boosting his voxmitter gain to maximal, 'we stand!'

'For He of Terra!' the humans shouted, their battle cry loud enough to be heard over the booming of guns.

'For He of Terra,' said Messinius. 'Fire!' he shouted.

The Space Marines fired first. Boltguns spoke, spitting spikes of rocket flare into the foe. Bolts slammed into daemon bodies, bursting them apart. Black viscera exploded away. Black ichor showered those coming after. The daemons' false

souls screamed back whence they came, though their bones and offal tumbled down like those of any truly living foe.

Las-beams speared next, and the space between the wall top and the scaling party filled with violence. The daemons were unnaturally resilient, protected from death by the energies of the warp, and though many were felled, others weathered the fire, and clambered up still, unharmed and uncaring of their dead. Messinius no longer needed his helm's magnification to see into the daemon champion's eyes. It stared at him, its smile a promise of death. The terror that preceded them was replaced by the urge to violence, and that gripped them all, foe and friend. The baseline humans began to lose their discipline. A man turned and shot his comrade, and was shot down in turn. Kryvesh banged the foot of his borrowed banner and called them back into line. Elsewhere, his warriors sang; not their Chapter warsongs, but battle hymns known to all. Wavering human voices joined them. The feelings of violence abated, just enough.

Then the things were over the parapet and on them. Messinius saw Tidominus carried down by a group of daemons, his unit signum replaced by a mortis rune in his helm. The enemy champion was racing at him. Messinius emptied his bolt pistol into its face, blowing half of it away into a fine mist of daemonic ichor. Still it leapt, hurling itself twenty feet over the parapet. Messinius fell back, keeping the creature in sight, targeting skating over his helmplate as the machine-spirit tried to maintain a target lock. Threat indicators trilled, shifting up their priority spectrum.

The daemon held up its enormous gnarled hands. Smoke whirled in the space between, coalescing into a two-handed sword almost as tall as Messinius. By the time its hoofed feet cracked the paving slabs of the square, the creature's weapon was solid. Vapour streaming from its ruined face, it pointed the broadsword at Messinius and hissed a wordless challenge.

'Accepted,' said Messinius, and moved in to attack.

The creature was fast, and punishingly strong. Messinius parried its first strike with an outward push of his palm, fingers spread. Energy crackled. The boom generated by the meeting of human technology and the sorceries of the warp was loud enough to out-compete the guns, but though the impact sent pain lancing up Messinius' arm, the daemon was not staggered, and pressed in a follow-up attack, swinging the massive sword around its head as if it weighed nothing.

Messinius countered more aggressively this time, punching in to the strike. Another thunderous detonation. Disruption fields shattered matter, but the daemon was not wholly real, and the effect upon it was lesser than it would be upon a natural foe. Nevertheless, this time it was thrown backwards by the blow. Smoke poured from the edge of its blade. It licked black blood from its arm and snarled. Messinius was ready when it leapt: opening his fist, ignoring the sword as it clashed against his pauldron and sheared off a peeling of ceramite, he grabbed the beast about its middle.

The Bloodletters of Khorne were rangy things, all bone and ropey muscle, no space within them for organs. The false god of war had no need for them to eat or breathe, or to give the semblance of being able to do so. They were made only to kill, and to strike fear in the hearts of those they faced. Their waists were solid, and slender, and easily encompassed by Messinius' power fist. It squirmed in his grip, throwing Messinius' arm about. Servo motors in his joints locked, supplementary muscle fibres strained, but the White Consul stood firm.

'Tell your master he is not welcome on Terra,' he said. His words were calm, a deliberate defiance of the waves of rage pulsing off the daemon.

He closed his hand.

The daemon's midriff exploded. The top half fell down, still hissing and thrashing. Its sword clanged off the paving and broke into shards, brittle now it was separated from its wielder. They were pieces of the same thing, sword and beast. Apart, the weapon could not survive long.

Messinius cast down the lower portion of the daemon. There were dozens of the things atop the wall, battling with his warriors and the human soldiery. In the second he paused he saw Doveskamor hacked down as he stood over the body of his brother, pieces of armour bouncing across the ground. He saw a group of Palatine Sentinels corner a daemon with their bayonets. He saw a dozen humans cut down by eldritch swords.

Where the humans kept their distance, their ranged weapons took a toll upon the Neverborn. Where the daemons got among them, they triumphed more often than not, even against his Space Marines. Support fire rained down sporadically from above, its usefulness restricted by the difficulty of picking targets from the swirling melee. At the western edge of the line, the heavy weapons were more telling, knocking daemons off the wall before they crested the parapet and preventing them from circling around the back of the Imperial forces. Only his equipment allowed Messinius to see this. Without the helm feeds of his warriors and the limited access he had to the Lion Gate's auspectoria, he would have been blind, lost in the immediate clash of arms and sprays of blood. He would have remained where he was, fighting. He would not have seen that there were more groups of daemons pouring upwards. He would not have given his order, and then he would have died.

'Squad Antiocles, engage,' he said. He smashed a charging daemon into fragments, yanked another back the instant before it gutted a mortal soldier, and stamped its skull flat, while switching again to his company vox-net. 'All units, fall back to the Penitent's Arch. Take the mortals with you.'

His assault squad fell from the sky on burning jets, kicking daemons down and shooting them with their plasma and bolt pistols. A roar of promethium from a flamer blasted three bloodletters to ash.

'Fall back! Fall back!' Messinius commanded, his words beating time with his blows. 'Assault Squad Antiocles to cover. Devastators maintain overhead fire.'

Squad Antiocles drove the enemy back. Tactical Space Marines were retreating from the parapet, dragging human soldiers with them. An Ultramarine walked backwards past him, firing his bolter one-handed, a wounded member of the Palatine Guard draped over his right shoulder.

'Fall back! Fall back!' Messinius roared. He grabbed a human by the arm and yanked him hard away from the monster trying to slay him, almost throwing him across the square. He pivoted and punched, slamming the man's opponent in the face with a crackling bang that catapulted its broken corpse over the wall edge. 'Fall back!'

Mortal soldiers broke and ran while Squad Antiocles held off the foe. Telling to begin with, in moments the assault squad's momentum was broken, and again more bloodletters were leaping over the edge of the rampart. The Space Marines fired in retreat, covering each other in pairs as they crossed the square diagonally to the Penitent's Arch. The mortals were getting the idea, running between the Adeptus Astartes and mostly staying out of their fire corridor. With the fight now concentrated around Squad Antiocles, the Devastators were more effective, blasting down the daemons before they could bring their weight of numbers to bear upon Antiocles. Sporadic bursts of fire from the retreating Tactical Marines added to the effect, and for a short period the number of daemons entering the square did not increase.

Messinius tarried a moment, rounding up more of the humans who were either too embattled or deaf to his orders to get out. He reached three still firing over the parapet's edge and pulled them away. A daemon reared over the parapet and he crushed its skull, but a second leapt up and cleaved hard into his fist, and power fled the weapon. Messinius pumped three bolts into its neck, decapitating it. He moved back.

His power fist was ruined. The daemon's cut had sliced right through the ceramite, breaking the power field generator and most of the weapon's strength-boosting apparatus, making it a dead weight. He said a quick thanks to the machine's departed spirit and smashed the top of his bolt pistol against the quick

seal release, at the same time disengaging the power feeds by way of neural link. The clamps holding the power fist to his upper arm came loose and it slid to the floor with a clang, leaving his right arm clad in his standard ceramite gauntlet. A century together. A fine weapon. He had no time to mourn it.

'Fall back!' he shouted. 'Fall back to the Penitent's Arch!'

He slammed a fresh clip into his bolt pistol. Squad Antiocles were being pushed back. The Devastators walked their fire closer in to the combat. A heavy bolter blasted half a dozen daemons into stinking meat. A missile blew, lifting more into the air. Messinius fell back himself now, leaving it to the last moment before ordering the Assault Marines to leap from the fray. Their jets ignited, driving back the daemons with washes of flame, and they lifted up over his head, leaving four of their brothers dead on the ground. Devastator fire hammered down from above. Anti-personnel weapons set into casemates and swivel turrets on the walls joined in, but the daemons mounted higher and higher in a wave of red that flooded over the parapet.

'Run!' he shouted at the straggling human soldiery. 'Run and survive! Your service is not yet done!'

The Penitent's Arch led from the square onto a wall walk that curved around to another layer of defences. His Space Marines were already making a firing line across the entrance. A gate could be extended across the arch, sealing the walk from the square, but Messinius refrained from requesting it be closed, as the humans were still streaming past the Adeptus Astartes. Kryvesh waved the banner, whirling it through the air to attract the terrified mortals. The Space Marines fired constantly into the mass of daemons sprinting after them, exhausting their ammunition supplies. Shattered false bodies tumbled down, shot from the front and above, yet still they came, overtaking and dismembering the last warriors fleeing away from the parapet.

Squad Antiocles roared through the arch, landing behind their brethren. Messinius passed between them. For a moment he

surveyed the tide of coming fury. Endless red-skinned monsters filling the square like a lake of spilled blood, washing over a score of brightly armoured Space Marine corpses left behind in the retreat. Several hundred humans lay alongside them.

He opened a vox-channel to Gate Command.

'Wall batteries three-seven-three through three-seven-six, target sector nine five eighty-three, Penitent's Square, western edge. Five-minute bombardment.'

'On whose order?'

'Captain Vitrian Messinius, White Consuls Chapter, Tenth Company. I have the primarch's authority.' As he dealt with gunnery control, he was also datapulsing a request for resupply, and checking through layered data screeds.

'Voice print and signum ident match. Transponder codes valid. We obey.'

The far side of the square erupted in a wall of flame. Heavy cannon shells detonated in a string along the rampart. High-energy beams sliced into the square, turning stone and metal instantly to superheated gas. The approaching daemons were annihilated. A few bolt-rounds cracked off as the last daemons nearing the Space Marine line were put down.

'Company, cease fire. Conserve ammunition.' Nobody heard him. Nobody could. He re-sent the order via vox-script. The boltguns cut out.

Penitent's Square was a cauldron of fire so intense he could feel the heat through his battleplate's ceramite. The ground shook under his feet and he considered the possibility that the wall would give way. The noise was so all-consuming the idea of speech lost relevance. For five minutes the Lion's Gate tore madly at its own hide, ripping out chunks of itself in a bid to scrape free the parasites infesting its fabric, then, as suddenly as it had begun, the bombardment ceased.

Where the Penitent's Square had been, a twisted mass of black metal and shattered stone remained. So formidable were

the defences of the Lion's Gate that the structure beneath had not been penetrated, but it was like this, in small bursts of destruction, that they could lose this war.

Messinius accessed the gate's noosphere. No daemons had as yet rounded the projecting Penitent's Spur to come up against their new position. When the attack came again, which it would, it would come from the front.

An ammunition train raced down the walkway from the fortress interior and came to a squealing stop fifty yards away. Medicae personnel jumped down. A Space Marine Apothecary came with them. Human peons rushed about with heavy sack bags full of bolter magazines, passing them out to the transhumans. Spent magazines clattered to the floor. New ones were slammed home. Messinius contacted his squad leaders, taking a quick census of his surviving men, not trusting the digits that read 'Company Casualties 23%' blinking in the upper right of his visual field.

Through the smoke given off by burning metal on the far side of the ruined square, he saw movement. Auspex returns tripped his armour's machine-spirit, and it blinked warnings in his helm.

<THREAT DETECTED.>

'They're coming again,' he said.

'My lord?' A soft voice, one that did not belong in that moment. He ignored it.

'Engage at fifty-yard range. Make every shot count.'

The ammunition train was hurriedly relieved of their allotted supplies, and sped off, bearing the worst-wounded, to aid whichever beleaguered unit needed it next.

'Stand ready.'

'My lord?' The voice became more insistent.

The voidships in orbit were beginning to fire. Their targeting systems were perturbed by the boiling warp energy and the vortex in constant motion over the Imperial Palace, and many

shots went wide, crashing down into the Anterior Barbican, a few falling as far out as Magnifican.

Red monsters bounded towards them, as numerous as before, as if their efforts to thin them had been for naught.

'Fire,' he said coldly.

'My lord, your duty rotation begins in half an hour. You told me to wake you.'

This time he heard. Bolters boomed. Messinius froze them with a thought, and with another he shut down the hypnomat entirely.

Vitrian Messinius awoke groggily.

'My lord,' his servant said. Selwin, he was called. 'You are returned from your recollections?'

'I am awake, Selwin, yes,' Messinius said irritably. His mouth was dry. He wanted to be left alone.

'Shall I?' Selwin gestured to the hypnomat.

Messinius nodded and rubbed his face. It felt numb. Selwin flicked a number of toggles on the hypnomat and it powered down, the steady glow of its innards fading to nothing and winking out, taking the immediacy of Messinius' memories with it.

'The wall again?' Selwin asked.

The hypnomat's primary use was to instil knowledge without active learning on the subject's part, but it could reawaken memories to be lived again. Full immersion in the hypnomat required cooperation from Messinius' catalepsean node, and coming out of the half-sleep was never as easy as true waking. Reliving past events dulled his wits. Messinius reminded himself to be guarded. He forgot sometimes that he was not on Sabatine any more. The local saying 'This is Terra' encompassed a multitude of sins. Spying was among them.

'Yes,' he said. 'Personal debriefing.' He shook his head and unplugged the hypnomat's input cables from the neural ports

set into his arms and neck. ‘Nothing new learned.’

Selwin nodded, then hesitantly said, ‘If I may be so bold as to ask, why do it, my lord, if you expect to learn nothing?’

‘Because I can always be wrong,’ Messinius said. He pointed at the hypnomat. It was a bulky machine set on a trolley, but not too big for an unaltered man to move. ‘Take that away. Inform my armourer I will be with him in a few minutes.’

Selwin bowed. ‘Already done, my lord.’

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